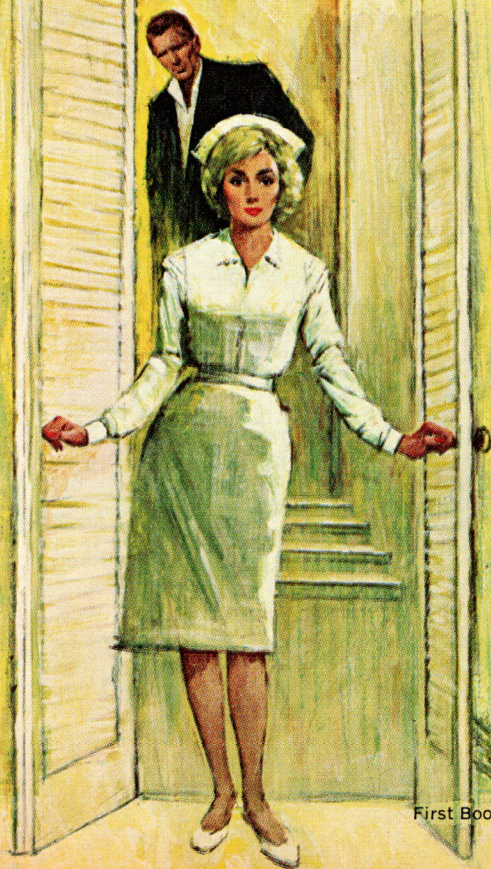


Was she dazzled by glamor, or was this really love?

HOTEL NURSE

TRACY ADAMS



First Book Publication

GLAMOR AND REALITY

The television audience watching *Nurse Penny* loved its version of a nurse's life: *The beautiful young nurse listened attentively to the handsome doctor. Efficient, obviously capable of meeting any emergency, she still had an air of glamor, of seductiveness, that drew the eyes of the doctor hypnotically to hers.*

But Kay Mercer knew the truth. She was a real nurse and she knew the long hours, the grueling work, the hope and the heartbreak. And now she knew she was losing Mark, Dr. Mark Bell, to the luscious actress who played the part of "Nurse Penny." Somehow she felt she should not just stand by and watch. She should do something, but whoever had written the script for this behind-the-scenes drama had apparently left Kay standing out in the wings.



HOTEL NURSE

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Tracy Adams has also written
SPOTLIGHT ON NURSE THORNE (D-549)

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I

WHEN KAY CAME out of her patient's room she saw the knot of people clustered at the far end of the hospital corridor, just to the right of the nurses' charge desk.

Mark was there, not in the whites he wore when he was in OP but in loose coat and tie, stethoscope hanging from a coat pocket. Kay felt that now-familiar lurch somewhere around her heart when she saw his dark head, and hugged her delicious secret to her heart. So far no one in Deepwood General Hospital knew that they were more than doctor and nurse and this alone made their relationship more exciting.

She went forward quickly now on her white rubber-soled shoes, her lithe young figure enhanced by the white nylon nurse's uniform she was wearing. She wondered what the

HOTEL NURSE

commotion was all about. In addition to some student nurses and Mark, there were a couple of interns and a strange, short young man who kept hopping around the periphery of the circle.

Then Kay saw her—a tiny mite of a girl in a suede fur-lined coat, her honey blonde hair covered by a fur toque. She was smiling up at the faces around her, particularly Mark who towered over her.

"I'm going to love every minute of it with all you wonderful people to help me," she was saying as Kay came nearer.

Kay knew her instantly. Penny Adair, Hollywood's and television's newest sensation. Kay had heard the rumors going around, that Penny Adair was going to spend some time at Deepwood to get material for her new television series *Nurse Penny*. The way Kay heard it, Penny wanted to put on a uniform and become a part of the whole picture. Kay had loved that phrase. She felt that by absorbing the sounds and sights and smells of a real hospital she could better portray the character Nurse Penny.

Even staid, correct Dr. Phelps who was hospital director, had agreed that it might be good publicity for the hospital, certainly wouldn't hurt so long as the routine of the staff and patients was not disturbed.

"We are here to heal the sick and tend to the afflicted, not put on a three-ring circus," was the way he put it.

Well, that remained to be seen, Kay thought ruefully, approaching the group. So far Nurse Penny had managed to disrupt this particular floor and the way that young intern Jerry Ryan was looking at her, she might prove to be an even greater disruptive factor in days to come. Oh well, Kay thought, so long as Mark doesn't join the happy throng.

Just as Kay came abreast of Mark, Penny reached out and thrust her arm through his. "Are you going to be my doctor

HOTEL NURSE

while I'm here?" she asked, wide-eyed, unbelievably beautiful.

For the first time since earning the coveted white uniform and cap, Kay felt dowdy and a hundred years old with her dark hair tucked neatly, too neatly, under the cap. The only nurses who look glamorous, she'd said once to a roommate in nurses' dorm, were the ones on television.

"But they don't have to prep patients, make beds, wrestle bedpans and walk miles," the other girl had answered.

"If you promise to follow orders," Mark said, Penny on one arm, reaching over to squeeze Kay's fingers a moment quickly, unobtrusively. "I'm very adamant about prescriptions being followed to a pill and I'm going to write out a prescription right now for you, orally that is. First rule of a smart nurse is to get off her feet as often as possible, sneak off the floor and head for that cup of coffee."

"Ha," one of the student nurses said. "Are you sure we're reading the right textbooks, Dr. Bell?"

"I'm with you," Penny said to Mark, smiling up at him.

Mark turned to Kay. "How about it? Join us?"

"Thanks, some other time," Kay said, hoping she didn't sound too firm and tight lipped. "I've a patient who insists on having a baby right now."

"Good girl," Mark said. He and Penny walked off turning into the supply room where the nurses on the floor kept an automatic coffeepot going all day and all night. How many times had Kay stopped in for a fast cup of coffee to pick her up or wake her up or steady her nerves when she was in training. As a matter of fact, Mark had kissed her for the first time in one of those rooms, the day she'd informed him pertly that it was her birthday.

That's how it started. The kiss startled them both. He drew back and said, "Like wow!" And she felt her color rise and

HOTEL NURSE

her heart do things that would have sent her packing for a doctor if she'd noticed the same symptoms in a patient.

They had dated infrequently during his internship and her training days. When one had a few hours off, the other had duty. As an intern, sometimes Mark was on duty for thirty-six hours at a stretch. But now that he had moved into his residency, he had better hours, or so it seemed.

Maybe it was because Kay was freer now. As a registered nurse she kept to her eight-hour schedule, living close by in an apartment she shared with her younger sister. When Mark managed a few hours off, he'd walk over for a meal or to sit and listen to records, sometimes to just fall asleep on the couch in the living room until Kay woke him up and sent him back to the hospital.

"I love him," Kay would think with wonder and excitement. I love him in a way that makes me think of him first and then of the rest of the world and the people in it. She wondered if that was a selfish way to love, but then Kay had never tasted love before. Her only worry or fear, now, was that she and Mark might be missing out by waiting for him to finish residency, decide upon what to do with his future. How long could they wait? Was love like an insurance policy? Could you claim it whenever you'd a mind to cash in on it?

Kay walked over to the charge desk now.

"Is Dr. Peterson in the building yet?" she asked. "He's going to deliver Mrs. McNally."

"He called; he's on his way," Madge Edwards, the desk clerk, said. "Hey, how about that? Isn't she cute? And she's going to be around a lot the next few weeks. I'm going to get my teenaged Sheila to come in and maybe meet her. She'll get a charge out of that; you know how kids are. Think Dr. Phelps would mind? I'll have her come in during visiting

HOTEL NURSE

hours, depending on when Penny Adair is around. Hey, better hang onto your guy, Kay."

Kay felt herself getting annoyed. Madge was a shrewd one who sat at this desk all day long and knew more about what went on in the hospital than some of the nurses themselves. Did she know about Kay and Mark or was it just another one of her silly remarks?

Kay decided to ignore the remark lest by saying anything she made Madge more suspicious.

"Well, I hope Dr. Peterson shows up soon. My patient is ready for the labor room," she said.

Walking back to 540 she felt irritated. The day she had to work to hang on to her guy, as Madge said, would be the day she'd turn in her womanhood badge.

Pride was one of Kay's strongest points, her mother used to tell her long before she had died last year of a massive cerebral hemorrhage. And pride had seen Kay through many a bad time in her life. As children, she and her younger sister had had very little, because their parents had separated when Kay was only seven, and a year later their father died in a fall from a bridge he was painting. You had to have lots of pride to wear hand-me-down clothes, to go to high school without extra money, and more pride to borrow from a girl friend for lunch hoping you'd get a baby-sitting job to pay it back. Kay's determination to get an education, to enter nursing school and graduate had also been sustained by her pride and the wish not to give into circumstances but to fight and get what she wanted most out of life.

She had almost reached 540 when she remembered something. Turning, she went swiftly back to Madge.

"I'll be with Mrs. McNally," she said to Madge. "When a girl named Ruth calls for me, will you please tell her that I'll meet her at the hotel at seven o'clock tonight in the main lobby. And to wait for me if I'm late."

HOTEL NURSE

"Oh oh, sounds good," Madge said, writing down the message on her pad. "Will do, chum."

This time Kay flew back to her patient; she had been gone too long.

Mrs. McNally had been admitted an hour before. She'd had mild contractions at fifteen minute intervals at home and her membranes had ruptured before her husband admitted her into the hospital. Both Mrs. McNally and her husband had studied natural childbirth and Mrs. McNally was eager to have her baby that way. She was being sweet and brave and cooperative and Kay only hoped that she could see it through to the end. How many young girls came in to have first babies full of brave courage and high hopes only to fall apart when the real work began and the pains became like a crushing, monstrous mountain.

"Hi," she said now, pushing open the door of the room. "How you doing?"

"Contractions lasting thirty to forty seconds," Mr. McNally said. He was standing beside his wife's bed doing effleurage for his wife and timing the contractions like a real pro.

"Good. Dr. Peterson called and he's on his way. Just hold out until he gets here, will you, Mrs. McNally?"

"My name is Alice," the woman said. Her face was pale and wisps of damp blonde hair clung to her forehead.

"Mine is Kay," Kay told her. "What is it?" she asked when the woman gasped.

"Oh, I feel a strong pull and painful pressure in the sacral area during contractions."

"Well, then let's see if we can help. Another one coming on? Breathe slowly; take it easy. Mr. McNally, apply pressure to the sacral area while I effleugate. Easy does it; don't try too hard. Just roll with the tide and it'll be much easier."

The woman relaxed as the contraction passed. She licked

HOTEL NURSE

her dry lips. Kay picked up a shallow plate with ice chips in it from the night table.

"Here, have a lollipop," she said. "Suck on the ice chip and your lips won't get so dry. It's the shallow breathing that dries your mouth. But you're doing a first rate job. I'll bet you're proud of her, Mr. McNally."

"You bet," the husband said, but Kay saw the signs of strain beginning to tell on his face. His jaw was set too tight and his hand shook a little as he took a handkerchief out of a pocket and passed it quickly over his forehead. "You're doing fine, honey. It'll be over before you know it. I can run down and get us a pizza for snacks."

"I bet you're hungry," his wife said. "When did you last eat?"

"Who needs food? I'm going to be a father," he said feebly.

But his wife didn't hear him. She raised her knees in the position she had been taught and once again Kay started rubbing her while her husband applied pressure to her sacral area. This contraction lasted longer than the rest. Kay knew it wouldn't be too long now before delivery.

Just then Dr. Peterson walked in.

"Hi, folks," he said, smiling at his patient and her husband. "Bert, you using this as an excuse to knock off the job?"

"Can you think of a better one?" Bert McNally said, suddenly relieved because the doctor was there.

They're all like that, Kay thought. In any part of the hospital, patients look toward the door for the reassuring figure of the doctor to come through and when finally he's there it's as though all good things come with him.

Quickly the doctor examined his patient. "Cervix 5 cm dilated," he said to Kay, pulling off rubber gloves and discarding them. "I guess we better get you to where you can

HOTEL NURSE

do some really hard work. Nurse, see that Mrs. McNally is taken to labor room three."

Kay went out of the room to summon an orderly with the stretcher and to leave the husband and wife alone a moment. When she returned, both looked strained.

"I had a terrible pain," the woman said. "And I forgot what I was supposed to do!"

"Well, just scootch over here on this carriage right now and I'll give you a ride," Kay said. She began talking soothingly to the patient as they rode down the hallway to labor room 3, knowing that right now she needed someone to bolster her courage. "Just take it easy; your pain threshold has dropped because you're a little too eager. It takes time; you read that too, didn't you? The first two-thirds of this game is the hardest; after that, a breeze. Now remember about the breathing."

"But they're coming so fast," the woman said. "Another one, now." She began shallow breathing, with Kay beside her helping to ease the pain.

She was on the narrow bed in the labor room now. Dr. Peterson came in and did another quick pelvic examination. "Fine, going along so fast I'll be home for dinner," he said. "Nurse, cervix 7 cm dilated now. Stay with her, will you?"

Kay nodded. She offered verbal encouragement, massaged, helped soothe her when the pains engulfed her. She knew, from having attended other births that just her presence there helped the patient. She now was intent on her work, sometimes seemingly oblivious to Kay, but Kay knew better.

Once she said, "I'm going to be sick."

"Go ahead." Kay quickly handed her a small pail. "It's only the contractions; don't be afraid of it."

Now the contractions became powerful. Kay went into the other room a second to inform Dr. Peterson. Efficiently and without haste the woman was transferred to the delivery

HOTEL NURSE

room, her feet put in stirrups. She was draped and an anesthetist took his place at her head.

Kay, mask and gown over her nurses' uniform now, took her stance near the woman.

Like the third act of a play, Kay had thought once. It all leads up to this moment when finally a baby is born.

Dr. Peterson took up his position. "What do you want, quick, Alice? Boy or girl?"

Mrs. McNally grimaced. A pain overtook her and she gasped. The anesthetist waited until it had passed, then gave her some oxygen to help restore her strength.

"Alice, with the next contraction push hard; the baby's head is visible now."

It happened, as it had happened so many times since she had been a nurse. Suddenly Kay saw the baby's head and with another strong contraction the shoulders, and the doctor gently, artfully grasped and brought life into the world. Kay couldn't help but feel the spurt of tears in her eyes. Tears of joy, of satisfaction, she never knew. This part of nursing was fun; this was watching a miracle, day after day.

During training, when she had witnessed her first death and become completely unstrung, Mrs. Page, one of the nursing instructors, had sent her into OB. The balance, Kay had realized after a few days—there is death in a hospital but there is life, too. Old life renewed and new life being given every day of every week.

"A girl," Dr. Peterson laughed. "Shall we send her back for a boy?"

"Myra," Alice McNally said. "That's her name." Her voice was weak but triumphant.

"Okay, Myra, go get your face washed." Dr. Peterson handed the baby to the nursery nurse. Now she'd get her face washed and her nose cleaned and her mouth freshened and her eyes taken care of, after which she'd be finger-

HOTEL NURSE

printed and footprinted and get her first worldly identification, the bracelet beads.

Kay leaned over to congratulate the mother. The anesthetist had given her a whiff of ether while Dr. Peterson did some minor repair work. She was sleeping. Later she'd see her baby with her husband and it would have been more than worth the hours of pain and worry.

She came out of the delivery room a few minutes later, tired and knowing she had worked overtime as usual. But that was the way of it. She couldn't have left Mrs. McNally nor had she really wanted to. Still, it meant she probably had missed an early supper with Mark in the cafeteria.

She wondered where he'd be when she saw him come striding toward her.

"Hi," he said. "I figured you'd still be around here. Look honey, let me off the hook on that supper date? Dr. Phelps is holding a briefing on the Anson case and he asked if Penny wanted to sit in, since she was in the hospital anyway. I said I'd take her. Give me a rain check?"

"Oh, sure." Kay smiled but she hoped the smile didn't reveal her deep disappointment. She looked forward to every minute she spent with Mark, and breaking a date because of hospital hours or an emergency was one thing, but breaking it on account of Penny Adair didn't quite seem the same. "Anyway, I've got to rush right along. Ruthie called and there's something important she wants to discuss. I'm meeting her at the hotel at seven."

"Everything's important to Ruthie since she set that wedding date," Mark smiled. "But you go on. Just don't promise to go along on their honeymoon. Most I'll let you do for Ruthie is be her bridesmaid, okay?"

"Okay." She felt a warm rush of tenderness toward him and wished he could kiss her right then and there.

"Not sore?" he asked softly.

HOTEL NURSE

Kay looked into his dark eyes. I love him so much I don't care if it shows, she thought, and it probably does. And I could hate him for breaking our date just to be with that silly Penny Adair.

"If it weren't so public, I'd kiss you," Mark said softly, touching her hand quickly.

"Rain check on that, too?" she said wistfully.

"You'd better believe it," he said.

They parted. Kay went down to the nurses' lounge to pick up her coat and purse. If her sister Betty was home, she'd cook something. Otherwise she'd stop in for a sandwich and a malt at the Greek diner on the corner. Betty was going to college by day and working part-time in a department store at night after school. It was too heavy a schedule for her and Kay wished she could help her more. But Betty was a responsible girl who didn't mind doing her share.

One of these days, Kay thought, as she walked out of the huge white-washed hospital, I'm going to find a magic lamp in a junk shop and rub it and get every wish I ever wanted.

She went straight to the apartment to change her clothes in order to meet Ruth. Tonight, she wouldn't have to stop and buy groceries on the way for her dinner. Betty was eating out and she would have something with Ruth. But she'd have much preferred to be with Mark. There's so little time to be together, she thought resentfully; I hate to lose even a minute of it. And I don't honestly like Penny Adair even though I don't know her. I don't like her because right now she's with Mark, and I am not.

It was in that kind of mood that she went to meet Ruth.

II

WALKING INTO the plush lobby of the Hanes Hotel in the heart of the city a few hours later, Kay felt as though she were entering another world.

Deepwood wore its hospital look like a mantle: the tiled floors, the pale cream walls, the slightly medicinal air, the aura of immediacy prompting everyone to look sharper, step along the corridors faster.

Here, at Hanes, Kay felt herself relaxing, expanding under the studied luxury of the hotel. Her feet sank into a deep red plush rug and she felt beautiful and desirable and wanted as she walked up the wide wide staircase leading into the main lobby.

Unlike the people who came into the lobby of Deepwood, there because they had to be, here the men and women going past Kay were obviously on the town for the night. She passed a couple, the woman with silver gray hair, but wearing a full-length mink coat like a queen. The man beside her held her elbow lightly as they descended the stairs.

Kay wondered how it would feel to be wearing a long mink coat and to be gliding down these stairs on the arms of . . . well, on Mark's arm. Would she and Mark ever be able to afford such luxury? Or would they come here perhaps in ten years for a class reunion? Were hotels like this meant only for a very few? It bothered her, as she made her way down the wide wide corridor passing tiny shops which offered exquisite and expensive trifles for ladies.

HOTEL NURSE

She stopped in front of one of the windows. A pin had attracted her. It was a gold pin in the shape of a sunburst, with tiny pearls clustered at the stem. There wasn't even a price tag. Farther back, nesting on black velvet was a necklace, a cascade of shimmering gold needlepoints. Did it feel cool against the throat, Kay wondered. Automatically, she fingered her pearl choker. She'd paid five ninety-eight for it and wore it so much it had become a part of her.

My chances of ever owning diamonds and rubies and gold after marrying Mark are slim, she told herself as she turned away from the window. But who needs them? Just think of all that insurance!

She was smiling to herself when Ruthie came up to her. Ruth was a brown-haired girl with a quick, darting look about her.

"Hi," she said. "I'm late, I'm sorry. We've got a panicky new mother on the twelfth, thought her child had swallowed a pin! Gee, I'm glad to see you, Kay. Come on, let's go into the grill room; I'm starved. It was sweet of you to come down here; gives us more time to talk. I don't have to be back on duty until eight."

Ruth has tossed a gold sweater over her shoulders. As the two girls found a seat in the grill, one of the few booths right near the door, she took off her sweater, revealing her nurses' uniform. In here, among the early evening crowd, she looked much out of place, but it didn't seem to bother her at all.

A waiter came and Ruth declined a cocktail while Kay ordered a glass of wine. When it came, she sipped it slowly, her eyes roaming around the room, half listening to Ruth talking away fast, as she always did.

"So listen, that's the deal. I spoke to Dr. Blank about you and he said 'Fine; why not?' and all that kind of thing, and anyway, I'll only be gone six weeks in all. 'Ruthie,' he said, 'get that honeymoon out of your system because you're not

HOTEL NURSE

much good to me around here the way you are.' He's cute, no kidding."

"Cute? I thought you said Dr. Blank was a hundred years old!" Kay laughed.

"Well, you know what I mean; he's not sixteen. But, Kay, will you take over my job for me while I'm gone? If you don't, they'll get someone else and I'll lose it and honestly, Kay, I just can't. Sid and I will need so many things when we get back from our honeymoon and this job is ideal, just ideal. I only work two nights a week and weekends and that's nothing. My hours are divine, and I can be home and do all my work and still see a lot of Sid."

"But I don't know how to be a hotel nurse!" Kay said seriously. "Oh, let's order. Mmm, it all looks so good."

"Have the grilled ribs of beef," Ruth said. "Absolutely out of this world. And a salad for me."

"That sounds good," Kay said, handing the menu to the waiter. When he was gone she turned back to Ruth. "Now slowly, tell me more about the job."

"All right." Ruthie spread her hands on the table and leaned closer to Kay. "There are eleven hundred rooms in this hotel. There is a large medical staff—three doctors, four nurses. Nurses rotate; some of us come in part time, as I do. Mrs. Johnson is here every day, all day. She's an old-timer and has lived in the hotel the past ten years. Your job isn't hard, but it means you have to be there all the time. I'll take you up to medical with me when we finish dinner. We take all sick calls from the desk. People come in here with the darndest ailments.

"We had a man here from South America last week who swelled up like crazy. We really had ourselves a bad half hour until we found out he was allergic to mosquito bites. He'd been bitten by a mosquito when he went out to New Jersey to inspect some oil plant. Half hour later, bingo, he

HOTEL NURSE

was something for the books. But that's what I mean, the things you'll run into.

"On the top five floors there are apartments for permanent residents. These are people with money and lots of it. They all have their private physicians, of course. But emergencies do arrive and that's what we're here for. Also, you have the staff. A guy in the kitchen whacks off a finger, we have to be there to pick up the pieces. Things like that. Children get sick; their parents call the desk because they're strangers in town and don't know where to turn.

"Dr. Blank is associated with Midtown Hospital. Really ill patients are referred there immediately. You'll get the hang of it. It's like anything else, you don't know until you're in it. But take it from me, I love it. Every cotton-picking minute of it and all the people here."

"It's different from a hospital." Kay's eyes roamed around the darkened grill with its polished bar and more polished people.

"You'll love it, I'm telling you," Ruth said. "Now tell me something about yourself, your love life. How's it shaping up?"

"Wait a minute, don't get off the subject," Kay said.

"Why not? Need to know more about the job? Or the pay? Pay's good. And think what you can do with all that lovely extra loot! Why in six weeks you can make enough to finance a honeymoon for you and Mark. Or isn't that romance on anymore?"

"As on as any hospital romance can be," Kay said. Unbidden, the face of Penny Adair came to her mind and she wondered how much "background" Miss Adair was gathering at just this moment. So long as the background didn't include one doctor called Mark, Kay thought.

"The money does sound beautiful," she said now to Ruth. "You know, my sister's been working nights to help put her-

HOTEL NURSE

self through school and I'd like her to take it a little easy, especially now as the term gets harder. I remember how it was with me. I think, honestly, halfway through that first year, I was ready to quit. I got the shakes, didn't you? It all seemed so endless and even pointless."

"So good, now you have two reasons for taking the job. You can help your sister and you can sure help me."

"When's the wedding?"

"Saturday," Ruth said. "You sure you won't come? It has to be in Jersey; his folks live there. And since my family is on the west coast—"

"I'd come if I could, you know that," Kay said. "I work Saturday. But, gee, this Saturday. That means I have to make up my mind right now."

"What's to make up?" Ruth said. "Look around, chum; breathe in the glamor. Come on, you should be begging me!"

"It's not that at all; it's just that I won't get to see Mark at all," Kay said. "You know his routine. We're lucky if we have a date a week. I thought when he got to be a resident it would be different. Why do we do it?"

"Why? Why do men climb a skyscraper? Or a mountain? Why do we nurse? Heck, I guess we just have to do what comes natcherly. Isn't that Ethel Merman something? She was here, you know; I saw her going into the Madrid Room. I heard she belted out a song. What a voice. Hey, here comes our food and am I starved!"

They ate ravenously. Kay said, "Do you eat like this all the time?"

"Of course not, silly," she said. "I go out to supper; there's a hamburger joint around the corner where you get better coffee than you can make at home. Kay, I forgot to tell you, my Aunt Olive, bless her old heart, came through with a whooping check. I'm going to buy half my furniture with it; isn't that terrific? And listen to this, Sid's mother and father

HOTEL NURSE

asked him what we wanted most for a wedding present and Sid said a honeymoon, and that's what they're giving us. I'm so darn excited. Listen, do you think I can live through it without going to pieces?"

Kay felt her own heart give a lurch. What a dream come true it must be to finally be facing your wedding day. If she and Mark were getting married Saturday—why, if they were really getting married she wouldn't be able to sit here calmly and eat dinner! She'd be shouting it in the streets.

The girls talked then about clothes and more of Ruth's plans. When the check came, Kay reached for it.

"Not that I make a habit of this on my kind of pay check," she said. "But after all, you are the bride, or about to be."

"Yeah, isn't it wonderful?" Ruth beamed.

They left the grill and walked back to the main lobby where they took an elevator to the third floor. There Ruth took Kay into medical. It was quite a setup; Kay had to admit she was surprised. She had always thought of a hotel as just that more or less, lobbies, restaurants, shops, rooms and people. But tucked up here on the third floor was a complete medical unit with reception room, three bright, well-equipped examining rooms and Dr. Blank's huge office. In addition there was a room for the nurses with a bath and closet for their clothes. Most of them, Ruth said, preferred to change at the hotel, keeping their uniforms in the closet, sending them to the hotel laundry.

"You never know when you need to be dressed up," Ruth winked at Kay. "That's how I met my Sid."

Sid, Kay knew, was head of the maintenance crew of the huge hotel.

"Well, it certainly sounds more like a glamor job than Deepwood," Kay said. "Now what do I do?"

"Now, you meet Dr. Blank, if he's in," she said. "That's only a formality. No kidding, I've spoken about you like you

HOTEL NURSE

were Miss Florence Nightingale herself. And he's a sweet guy. I'll see if he's in and you can talk to him right now, okay?"

Kay nodded. Ruth went out to the reception room and spoke to a young girl at the desk. She came back and took Kay's arm.

"We heard the lion in his den," she said, leading her to the closed door of the doctor's office. She knocked, then when she heard the doctor's, 'Come in,' she entered.

"I've got my replacement here, Dr. Blank," she said. "Have you time to talk to her now?"

"Of course, of course." Dr. Blank stood up, a lean man with a shock of white hair, deep blue eyes.

"This is Kay Mercer, Dr. Blank. She's the nurse I spoke to you about. She'd like to fill in for me while I'm away. I'll leave you two alone now."

The interview lasted a little more than ten minutes. After going over her training record and experience briefly, Dr. Blank tried to fill her in on the routine of the medical department, much as Ruth had done.

"We're kind of like an emergency crew here," Dr. Blank smiled at Kay. "People don't come to a hotel to get sick. But they do get sick. And we're here to help them over that first hurdle. I doubt that we'll be performing major surgery here or making medical history. But in a way, we're even as important as a hospital. We're that one step between living and dying sometimes. Heart failure, accident, an occasional distraught person, we have to be prepared for all these emergencies much as your Deepwood Hospital is ready and waiting in their emergency wing. Think you'd like it?"

"I want to try it," Kay said truthfully. "I hope I'll work out well."

"No reason why you shouldn't," he said. "It's only a short time and you may do no more in that time than bandage a cut fingernail."

HOTEL NURSE

They spoke then, briefly, about wages, and Dr. Blank stood up, offering his hand.

"Welcome to Hanes," he said.

"Thank you," Kay answered.

Ruth was waiting for her, sure that the job was hers.

"I'm so grateful," she hugged Kay. "I'll even name my first little doll after you if you like."

"I won't hold you to that," Kay laughed. "Will I see you again before the wedding?"

"Are you sure? Really sure you can't make it? Try? Play sick or something?"

"I don't know." Kay didn't want to disappoint her. "Let me say maybe. Maybe something will come up. Anyway, be happy, hear? That's an order!"

"Yes, doctor." Ruth hugged her once again, quickly.

"You, too, Kay," she said. "I can only wish you the best and that's what I have, lots of happiness."

There were tears in her eyes as she said it and Kay felt herself responding quickly, warmly to her friend's good wishes. She said good-bye quickly and left.

Only when she was back in her apartment undressing did she wonder what Mark would think of this extra job? Would he mind too much? In a way, she hoped so, and yet, it did promise to be terribly exciting.

III

SEATED AT a small table for two pushed up against the wall in the hospital cafeteria, Kay took her time over her meal of macaroni and cheese and salad. Her eyes kept darting to the door and then to the huge electric clock right over the entrance. If Mark didn't come in soon she'd have to go back to her floor duty. He'd promised to meet her here. Unless an emergency had come up, he'd have to eat his lunch.

Kay sipped her coffee, avoiding looking at any of the girls coming into the cafeteria lest they come over and sit with her. Oh, Mark, please hurry and walk in; she tried sending him thought messages. Her sister Betty had come home with a magazine that had a fascinating article on mental telepathy. "Anyone can practice it, anyone can learn to do it," the article had said.

Well, I'm practicing, Kay thought ruefully; now let me see if I can really do it. She concentrated on Mark's face, that well remembered, beloved face and as usual, her heart quickened. I wonder how it is for other lovers who aren't bound by clocks and hospital rules and time, she asked herself. To know that at night I will be with Mark, that he will touch my hand and kiss me, hold me close against him.

Last night was a case in point. She had wanted so much to talk to him and tell him about taking over Ruthie's job for a short while. She had called the hospital on the off chance he'd be free. But he was unavailable, the switchboard had

HOTEL NURSE

said. Unavailable could mean anything. He could be on duty, in the operating room, in conference or maybe grabbing a short sleep in the doctor's lounge on the second floor.

She'd had to be content to talk to Betty instead. Betty had listened, wrapped up in a red woolly fleece robe, her brown hair in two inch metal curlers.

"This job means you can quit your job for a while and concentrate on your studies," Kay had insisted. "You're wearing down to a string and I don't aim to have you sick on me, chum."

"Listen, I'd like nothing better than to quit working for a while," Betty said. "I was born to be lazy. But you're sure? Kay, you need a lot of things, some clothes. So do I. Maybe it'd be a better idea for me to keep on working. This extra dough could mean vacation money, new clothes; you know, we can stop counting pennies for a while."

"I insist," Kay said. "At least until after you finish mid-terms, okay?"

"Don't twist my arm," Betty yawned luxuriously. "But I'll have to give my feet a good talking to. They won't know what happened when I get off them for a while."

Kay had laughed. Betty and she had one thing going for them that perhaps other sisters didn't. They'd gone through so much together, managed to keep together for that matter, that they were more than just sisters now, they were friends, too. If sometimes Kay felt like a mother toward her little sister, she hoped it didn't show.

It had been fun discussing the new job with Betty, but Mark was also involved here, Kay knew.

She sipped her coffee. Ten more minutes and she'd simply have to go back to the floor. The door swung open and she saw him then. He paused for a second at the door, his dark eyes sweeping the cafeteria. At that moment every inch of Kay was aware of him, every fiber of her being shouted out

HOTEL NURSE

to him. He saw her then, grinned, and nodded his head. He went over to the steam table and picked up a cup of coffee and some pie; then he was striding toward her.

"Hi," he said, pulling out his chair and sitting down, facing her. "Do you suppose we'd get into trouble if I were to pick you up and make mad love to you right here in front of everybody?"

"Try it," she teased, her heart bounding around like a toy balloon.

"Okay, I might even get fresh," he said, his eyes moving slowly, deliciously over her body or as much of it as he could see with the table between them. "Some day I'm going to make love to you in a way you'll never forget. And when I'm through making love to you I'll start all over again."

Her voice shook, her limbs trembled; in that moment if he'd picked her up and said, 'Let's go off to a mountaintop,' she'd have gone without a thought of the future, past or present.

"You say that to all your girls?" she teased him.

"Only when they look like you," he said. "Haven't met many like that recently. Hey, too bad you weren't around here last night. I brought Penny in here for a real hospital flavor type supper and the place flipped over her. I wish you could have seen some pre-med students. They were sitting over by the railing and one of them made like an ape. Good thing Dr. Phelps wasn't around; the joint was jumping."

Penny Adair. Like a balloon that is suddenly pricked by a pin. Kay felt her exhilaration ooze out of her body. So that was why Mark had been unavailable last night.

"Did she spend the night at the hospital?" she asked, a little too bitingly she realized.

"Heck no," Mark said. "Listen, she's a real queen, that gal. She even pretended to like this food. I knew darn well she

HOTEL NURSE

was going on to the theater and dinner at some posh restaurant later. I tell you, Penny's got class."

Penny. Well, he couldn't keep calling her Miss Adair, could he? Or could he? Did she call him Dr. Bell? Or was it Mark?

Kay shook off the ugly feeling of jealousy, hating herself and yet unable to leave the subject of Penny alone.

Mark said, "What did Ruthie want last night?"

"Oh," Kay was brought back to her news. "She asked me to sub for her at the hotel while she's on her honeymoon. I'm a sort of job-sitter you might call it. Ruthie loves the job and she and Sid will need the money she'll earn when they come back from their honeymoon. So, I told her I would take over for a while."

"What does that mean, take over? What about your job here in the hospital?" Mark frowned.

"I'll keep my job here," Kay said. "I only have to work at the hotel about four nights a week and on weekends. And weekends doesn't mean around the clock; eight hour tours is all. I might work during the day or four to twelve, depends on the scheduling. It pays good money, Mark, and it means Betty doesn't need to keep that part-time job now."

"Sure, it pays, but what kind of life is it for you? I mean, what about us? I have little enough time to be with you; this means I'll never be able to make a date with you."

It crossed Kay's mind that last night he'd been busy with Penny Adair when they might have had that hour or so together. It was all right for him to take on extra-curricular activities such as Penny Adair, but not for her to do it! She bit her tongue rather than start an argument.

"You're not always available anyway," she said as lightly as she could. "Mark, you know your hours are all messed up. We'll work something out. Besides, this is only a temporary thing."

"I don't like moonlighting," Mark said stubbornly. "If I

HOTEL NURSE

caught someone on my staff moonlighting on the job I'd raise Cain. Hey, does Miss Ames know?"

Miss Ames was director of nurses in the hospital.

"Miss Ames does not own my life outside this hospital," Kay said. "I'm not a student nurse, Mark. You don't make much sense. I can't understand why you should object to my taking a job as hotel nurse for a little while. You know I can always use the money."

"I don't like you fooling around some hotshot hotel and you don't really need the money that badly," he said. "After all, Betty's old enough to keep a job and go to school, too. I'm thinking of us, the little time we have together; that's why I don't like it!"

"I've already told Betty to quit her job," Kay said. "And as for us spending more time together, well, you seem to have Penny Adair around to take up your time quite a bit, too."

"What kind of crack is that?" Mark said angrily.

"I'm sorry," Kay put down her napkin and started to get up from the table. "I guess I'm just sore about last night. You did have dinner with her, didn't you?"

"Dinner? Yeeow. In this place?" he waved a hand in an arc, taking in the sterile looking cafeteria. "Boy, some date to take a dish like that to!"

A dish! A date! Kay felt her anger rising now too. "I'm sure if you could have, you'd have made it a more satisfactory place," she said. "I have to go now, Mark."

"Don't let me keep you, if that's your mood," he said, looking down at his coffee cup.

Kay hesitated a fraction of a second. If only he'd look up at her, smile, touch her hand, anything. He didn't. And she couldn't stand there with everyone in the cafeteria noticing that they were having a quarrel. She walked resolutely away, pushing hard against the swinging door. In the corridor, she

HOTEL NURSE

paused a second, her back tense, waiting, hoping he'd come after her. He didn't. Furiously, she turned toward the stairway and ran up, not looking back. If she had, she'd have caught Mark racing toward the elevator doors which were just closing. Mark cursed silently a moment under his breath, then he walked quickly away from the elevator, not up the stairs, but toward a corridor leading into an underground passage that left him in a wing of the hospital reserved for interns and residents. His room, now that he was a resident and didn't need to share it with anyone, was right off the corridor. He entered it, closed the door and reached for a cigarette. But instead of lighting it, he sat down on the bed, hands hung loosely between his knees and stared at his copy of Gray's Anatomy which had dropped off the desk. He sat like that for a long, long while, the frown in his forehead getting deeper and deeper.

Kay didn't know this, of course. She had gotten back to her floor in time to do a workup on a new admission.

Mrs. Phillips, charge nurse on duty, was someone Kay liked and respected. A widow, she had returned to nursing after her husband's death and her children no longer needed her at home for constant day care. She was a thin, brown-haired woman with deep, sad eyes. Sometimes Kay wondered what life had left for a woman widowed so young? Nights when all her work was done and her children asleep and she had to go into her bed alone, were those moments that left the deep haunting look in her eyes? Kay felt a kind of empathy for the woman so that no matter how stern she might seem, Kay didn't mind.

Even now, as Mrs. Phillips glanced at her watch the minute she saw Kay, noting the time was five minutes late, she didn't mind too much.

"Miss Mercer, lunch is not a leisurely meal around here. You will make a note of that," she said. "New admission,

HOTEL NURSE

room 405. Male, 55, white, Dr. Allen's patient. Will you do the workup now, please?"

"Yes, Mrs. Phillips," Kay said.

She went silently, swiftly to room 405. It was a semi-private room, four beds in it. The new patient was sitting on the edge of the bed, self-conscious in his hospital robe, leafing through a small black leather case.

Kay glanced at her chart. "Hello, Mr. Wardell," she said. "I'm Miss Mercer. I'm supposed to do a few things called a workup around here."

She smiled as she talked, taking in her patient, his pallor, his anxious eyes. She deftly pulled the curtain around the bed, after smiling to Mr. Barnovitch in the next bed.

"I don't really think there's anything wrong with me," Mr. Wardell said nervously, getting into bed as Kay directed. "Maybe it's old age creeping up on me."

"Old age? You've got at least fifty years to go for that," Kay smiled. They were all like this man during the first few hours in a hospital, apprehensive, suspicious as to what was being done to and for them, and afraid, terribly afraid unless they were well informed. And few patients are well informed, Kay often thought, because it's easier not to know the truth sometimes.

She took the man's blood pressure, noting it on the chart, his temperature, making notes as she went along, talking to him, letting him talk to relieve his tensions.

"I just woke up sudden-like, you know?" he kept saying. "And I can't hear and I'm sweating like a bull. I told my wife it felt more like food poisoning. Once we had a church picnic and a bunch of us got it with the potato salad. It was a hot day and this potato salad must have stood in the sun. Well, it was like that. Man, I was so dizzy my wife had to help me to the bathroom. Oh, hi, Doctor," he turned to the man who had parted the curtains. It was Dr. Allen.

HOTEL NURSE

"Hello, Andy," the doctor squeezed the man's hand on the white sheet. "Got a pretty girl taking care of you already? Didn't I tell you this is the place for a rest?"

"Sure, I like it fine," Mr. Wardell tried to be gallant. "But I like my pretty girls away from a hospital; no offense meant, Miss."

"No offense," Kay winked at him. "I like my boys away from the hospital, too. What do you think of that?"

"I think that's fine," he smiled. "Well, Dr. Allen? You going to operate on me or what?"

"Operate?" Dr. Allen smiled. "You want a lot for your money, Andy. No, I'm going to order up a series of tests to find out why you're here. Now tell me, when did all this start?"

"Well, it started with the ringing in my ears," the man said. "My God, the grinding, roaring in there is like a boiler factory."

"It continues, unabated?" the doctor asked.

"No, that's what's funny; sometimes it goes away. Then whango, like this morning, I couldn't hear at all out of my left ear."

"Was there anything else?"

"Well, I was dizzy and sick to my stomach," he said. "You know, my wife and I did eat chicken last night. I mean, it could be food?"

"But, Andy, you've had this a while you said," the doctor told him. "You don't eat chicken every night and it isn't always spoiled, right?"

"Guess you're right," the patient answered.

"So take it easy for now," he told him. "I'm going to do a few tests, find a fancy name for what you've got and then send you a bill."

"Okay, Doc," Mr. Wardell smiled. "I hope I don't have to stay here too long."

HOTEL NURSE

"We'll see; I don't think so," the doctor answered.

He nodded to Kay and started out of the room. Kay pulled aside the curtain and smiled at the patient. "See you later," she said, following the doctor out of the room.

The doctor was writing on his prescription blank. He saw Kay and started talking to her.

"Nurse, I'm taking salt out of Mr. Wardell's diet and I'm going to prescribe a mild sedative for him just to relieve his anxieties. I suspect it's Meniere's disease but I'll want to look into it further before I make a judgment on that. Will you take care of this, please, right away?" He tore off the blank and handed it to Kay. She nodded and took it.

Dr. Allen turned into another room to visit another one of his patients. She continued down the hall to the charge desk where she made a note of the prescription ordered on the patient's chart, then showed the prescription to Mrs. Phillips. She glanced at the chart, prescription, then turned into the small room off the charge desk where the medicines were kept in locked cabinets. She unlocked a cabinet, took out a large bottle with small yellow capsules in it and shook two out into a paper cup. After handing these to Kay, she returned the bottle to the shelf and locked the cabinet.

It was while Kay was going to Mr. Wardell's room to give the patient his medication that she saw Penny Adair. At first, Kay didn't recognize her. Instead of the fur toque and fur-lined suede coat she'd had on the other day, she was wearing a white uniform, flat-heeled, rubber-soled shoes like Kay's and her gorgeous hair was tucked neatly under a cap. Still, she managed to look like an ice cream cone, Kay thought.

Penny was walking with a student nurse who acted as though Richard Chamberlain had just kissed her. Kay went into room 405 to give the patient his medication. She paused long enough to help one of the other patients to the wash-room. When she came out she saw Penny at the charge desk,

HOTEL NURSE

looking at a piece of paper in her hand. As Kay started toward the desk, she heard Penny say, "Please tell Dr. Bell, when he comes up, that I'll meet him."

She crumpled up the piece of paper then and shoved it into a pocket of her uniform and strode toward the elevator.

Kay hoped her face didn't show her emotions at that moment. She was suddenly, horribly afraid that a door had been shut in her face. But more than that, she was afraid she had pulled the door with her own hands. Perhaps the hotel job hadn't been such a good idea at all. If anything, she was removing herself from the field of battle and leaving it wide open for Penny Adair to step in.

She wished there were some reason she could call Mark. But after that quarrel in the cafeteria what could she say? And it was too late to back out on the hotel nurse job even if she had wanted to. She had committed herself, Ruthie, Betty. Too many people were involved now.

"Miss Mercer," Mrs. Phillips looked up and saw her. "Will you take the call in 411, please?"

Kay turned right and started down the other corridor, her mind in a whirl.

IV

WHEN THE ALARM clock jangled, Kay turned over quickly and turned it off. Betty needed some extra sleep and so did she and why on earth had the foolish thing gone off on a Saturday morning?

Just as she was about to drift off into that delicious morning sleep, it came to her. Saturday morning! This was Ruthie's wedding day! And this was the morning she was to report for her job at the hotel.

Ruthie had been apologetic on the phone to her when she told her of the switch in schedule.

"Honestly, I thought you wouldn't have to come to work until Tuesday night but one of the girls is sick and now you will have to miss my wedding or I'll lose my job. Gee, does everyone have this much trouble getting married?"

Kay had felt a momentary stab at her words. Obviously, getting married wasn't the easiest feat accomplished in this world, at least not by all people.

"Ruthie, will you shut up a minute and let me get a word in edgewise?" she said. "It's okay, I'll be at the hotel on Saturday; just tell me what time, will you?"

"Eight o'clock in the morning," she said. "It's duck soup during the day; mostly little kids get sick at daytime. You'll be off at four and from there on in, Mrs. Johnson will tell you what your time will be. We're all kind of biloxied up this

HOTEL NURSE

weekend on account of Sylvia being sick and me going away. Thanks again, Kay. I mean it."

"Have a happy honeymoon," Kay had said.

Happy honeymoon! And happy moonlighting to me, she thought now as she forced herself out of bed and toward the bathroom. Maybe this wasn't the greatest idea since the world's fair; sleep sounded absolutely heavenly right now.

A little later, applying lipstick and sipping a cup of instant coffee while on her feet, Kay wondered if Mark would call today. When he could get away from the hospital, he usually just came right over. Nine times out of ten she'd either be home or around the corner shopping. She debated leaving a note. But then Betty would be home all day. She had studying to do, and a load of wash to take down to the laundromat. Besides, Kay would be home soon after four.

It bothered her, all the way down to the hotel on the bus, that Mark hadn't tried to get in touch with her the night before. That had been a silly quarrel and she didn't want the thought of it standing between them. Stubbornly, however, she clung to the thought that in this instance she was right and he was obstinate. He had no argument against her working at this job for a little while.

The hotel, at this hour of the morning, had the look of a house that's being polished and cleaned. A boy was sweeping down the wide sidewalk in front of the main entrance. Inside, others were polishing the huge staircase leading into the wide lobby that led through to the next street. The shops were closed, shades drawn discreetly on the doors. No lights touched the jewels in the tiny display windows because soft purple velvet cloths covered the displays. It's like the fifteen minutes before curtain time, Kay thought. In just a short while the whole place would come to life as if being tuned now by a fine musician.

She went to the bank of elevators to the right of the lobby

HOTEL NURSE

and up to the third floor. She turned left here down the long corridor with its plush red sculptured rug and then pushed open a door, marked discreetly, MEDICAL.

Here it was as though she entered a different world. The receptionist, herself a nurse, smiled at her when she saw her.

"Yes? Good morning." She was a woman in her thirties, blonde, pleasant.

"I'm Kay Mercer," Kay said. "I'm to report for duty, I'm taking over Ruth—"

"Oh, yes," the other woman interrupted, getting up from the wide desk and coming around to take Kay's hand. "I'm Lorna Frezell. Hello. Come on in, do. I guess I should have been expecting you. Let me show you to our so-called lounge."

"Ruthie showed me around a little," Kay offered.

"You have your uniform with you?" Lorna looked down at the small suitcase Kay was carrying.

"Oh, yes, Ruthie told me I could dress here," Kay said.

"Good," Lorna pushed open a door. "Look, get into the iron suit; I've got to get back and cover that desk. Then I'll have you meet Dr. Spence; he's on duty this morning. Right now he's bandaging Luis' sprained wrist. Luis is one of the maintenance men. Come out when you're ready."

"Thanks," Kay said. She took off her coat and hung it in the closet. Then she removed her skirt and blouse and changed into her working uniform, pushing her black pumps out of sight in the closet. Funny, she thought, I feel at home already in this uniform. Not so strange in these surroundings.

She went back to Lorna who stood up again when she saw her. "Come on, Luis just went out. I told Dr. Spence you're here."

She led Kay into the huge office where Kay had met Dr. Blank the day Ruthie brought her in for her interview. She wasn't quite prepared for Dr. Spence. He was a haunting edition of young Dr. Tom Dooley. There was that same inno-

HOTEL NURSE

cent, bright look in his blue eyes and as he bent over to shake hands with Kay she felt a power in this man and a complete dedication to his work. I like him, she thought instantly, and then wondered whatever gave her that idea.

"Glad to have you aboard," he grinned. "That's navy talk, see? We old salts never forget."

"I'm glad to be here," Kay said. "Although right now I don't see that there's much need for a nurse in this lovely place."

"Wait," he wagged a finger at her. "You would be amazed at the aches and pains a luxury hotel can produce in some people. And then there's always Luis. He manages to get fingers caught in the damndest places."

Kay laughed. "Well, it was nice meeting you, Doctor. I'll go along and look over my battlefield."

"Good girl," he nodded.

She went outside and ran into Mrs. Johnson, just coming out of the nurse's room. She smiled at Kay and said good morning.

"Want to go over supplies with me?" she said. "We're not always this slow here; sometimes we're really jumping."

Kay smiled, the words sounded so hip coming from a staid person like Mrs. Johnson. Together now the two women went into a small room off one of the examining rooms for patients and Kay helped Mrs. Johnson check the extensive supplies.

"I would never have guessed a hotel would be so well-equipped with surgical instruments," Kay marveled.

"Oh, yes, we have to be prepared," Mrs. Johnson said. "Actually, we don't perform surgery here, as you know. But as I said, we must be prepared for all emergencies. And we have delivered nineteen babies in this room," she laughed. "That's what we call the hotel's deluxe service."

"I should hope so."

"Miss Mercer, I'm going to see Mr. Porter in the laundry

HOTEL NURSE

department. Will you take over here, now, and check out drugs, please? I'll give you the key. Please wear it around your neck and let no one have it under any circumstances. We have a good supply of drugs on hand, as you will see."

"I'll take care of it," Kay said.

She heard the phone ring a few times. She saw Lorna walk back to Dr. Spence's office once. Lorna poked her head in and said, "Hi, how are you doing?"

And that was all. No wonder Ruthie hated to let this job get out of her hands, Kay mused. What a snap! Why, right now at the hospital she'd have been up and down the corridors at least a dozen times what with temps to take, rounds to clock with the staff, answering patients' lights and trying to sneak into the supply room for that cup of coffee.

The morning hours went by swiftly, even at that. Some people from the staff dropped in to chat with Lorna and were introduced to Kay. Then they had a minor emergency when a hysterical mother called about her little boy. She claimed he had swallowed a quarter. Kay had accompanied Dr. Spence to a suite on the fifteenth floor to find the boy calm and unhurt. He had swallowed a quarter, all right, but it was a chocolate candy quarter that resembled the real thing. Dr. Spence recommended the mother lie down for a half hour and recoup her senses.

A little later, Lorna called Kay. "Dr. Spence will be back in ten minutes. Let's go out and have lunch."

They went around the corner to the diner Ruthie had spoken of and had huge pastrami sandwiches on rye bread washed down with the best coffee Kay had ever had.

Later that afternoon, Lorna sent one of the bus boys around the corner for coffee and she and Kay giggled all the time they drank it. "What a thing to do to a place like this," Lorna laughed. "Bootlegging coffee."

Dr. Spence caught them at it.

HOTEL NURSE

"I won't tell if you share it with me," he said, taking the cup Lorna offered. "You know, my wife makes the worst coffee in the world. When I tell her, she reminds me I didn't marry her for that reason." He winked wickedly and Kay felt a momentary stab in her heart, remembering Mark. How like Mark Dr. Spence was. Older by a few years, but they had the same look about them. Lucky Mrs. Spence. Did she love her husband very much? And nights when he came home to her and she was in his arms, did she know how very very fortunate a woman she was?

Kay had hoped, no she'd expected, that the moment she got home there'd be a message for her from Mark. A call or a note, something. Betty said she'd been in most of the day, but nothing.

"Guess Mark's tied up this weekend on one of those thirty-six hour deals," she said to Kay. "Want to come to a movie with me and Gary?"

Gary was a boy she'd met in school and whom she'd been dating steadily the past month.

"You kidding?" Kay pretended to be dead tired. "I'm for a hot bath, a magazine and bed. I wouldn't go to a White House dinner tonight, even if Lady Bird herself asked me."

Betty looked worried. "Don't overdo now, Kay. I mean it."

"Who, me? That hotel thing's a snap," Kay said. "A good job for a pill pusher. Even you could do it."

After Betty had gone, Kay had a long bath, did her nails and hair, and looked at a television comedy program. And always she kept glancing at the clock, looking toward the door, wishing it to ring.

At nine-thirty she walked resolutely to the phone and dialed the hospital. The familiar "Deepwood General" stopped her a moment. Then lowering her voice, she said, "I'd like to speak to Dr. Mark Bell, please."

"Just a moment," the switchboard girl said.

HOTEL NURSE

Kay waited. Now she didn't know what she'd say to Mark when he spoke into the phone. "Hello, how are you? Why didn't you call me?"

She was ready to hang up when the operator came back on the line. "Sorry, Dr. Bell is off duty tonight."

Kay hung up the phone slowly. Dr. Bell is off duty tonight. But he hadn't called her; he hadn't gotten in touch with her at all. His precious night off and where was he?

Kay slumped into a chair. She could almost see him with Penny Adair on his arm, entering some plush restaurant, sitting beside her, bending over her to listen more closely to her words of wisdom. Then later, much later, did he draw her into his arms as he would have drawn Kay? And did his eyes have that quizzical look as he bent over to kiss her?

Kay's eyes felt hot and dry and she bit her lips hard so as not to cry. I don't care, she told herself. If that's all it was, I don't care. From far off she heard the traffic in the street and wondered if they were all happy people with someone they loved, going places together. Together. She said the word out loud. A lifetime of meaning is in that word, she thought suddenly, sadly.

She didn't have to work at the hotel or the hospital that Sunday. The sick girl was back and taking her duty. Kay would have it the following week. But it was the longest day of her life. She and Betty finally went out to dinner just to get away from the apartment. And even then Kay was frantic lest she miss Mark's call or his visit.

Monday morning she left for the hospital early. She entered the main lobby about seven-forty-five, eyes seeking, darting around in case Mark should be there. I don't rush to work because I love my job, she thought. I love Mark and the two of them are one somehow in my mind.

The elevator door opened as she approached and she stepped inside. As she waited for two orderlies to enter, too,

HOTEL NURSE

she saw Mark. He had just stepped out of the elevator next to hers. She saw the dark head, the slightly hunched shoulders, the profile that was now carved on her heart. She was about to call out to him when the doors of the elevator slid closed and she found herself ascending slowly to the third floor. Had Mark seen her? It wasn't likely. He had been talking to the man beside him. Where was he going? He was dressed as if to go out. Wasn't he on duty today? A hundred questions went through her mind but there was no time to answer them.

The moment she got on the floor she was engulfed in the Monday morning rush of the hospital. She picked up the temp tray and began to make the rounds, smiling at the patients, greeting new ones.

V

AFTERWARD, it was so easy to see how the mistake was made. It wasn't that Kay didn't have her mind on her work, either. It was an unforgiveable, dangerous mistake that shook every nurse on the floor and brought Dr. Phelps storming through the third floor.

Kay had been busy with her usual morning routines, and especially busy with a new patient, a Mrs. Hirtz, who had come into the hospital on Sunday afternoon. Mrs. Hirtz was a tiny bird-like woman of thirty-two with a face like a cameo, big black eyes and a fear of being a nuisance to the nurses.

When Kay had come in to take the morning temp and note it on her chart, Mrs. Hirtz was lying on her side, shivering.

"Are you cold, Mrs. Hirtz?" Kay asked, her eyes taking in the woman's discomfort and her growing terror.

"Yes, I feel terribly cold," the woman said. "Perhaps I could have another blanket?"

"Sure thing," Kay went to a drawer in the chest in the room and pulled out a wool blanket. She put it on the woman, then checked the thermostat in the room to see if it was working right. Although there were two beds in this room, only Mrs. Hirtz occupied it. A patient had gone home earlier that morning.

Kay picked up her temperature chart and started to leave when the woman called to her.

HOTEL NURSE

"Nurse, will you do me a favor?" she asked.

"Of course," Kay went to her bed. "You name it."

"My feet, why are they so cold?" she asked. "They feel like icicles."

Kay put her hand under the sheets and felt the woman's feet. Indeed they were cold and under all those blankets.

"Have you been walking around without your slippers on?" she smiled. "To the bathroom?"

"No, that is, I wore my slippers." The woman turned on her back now, pulling the blankets up under her chin. "Am I going to die? Is that what it's like? My feet feel as though they're not a part of me anymore."

"Come on now, don't go making your own diagnosis at these prices," Kay tried to put the patient at ease. But she could sense the near panic of the woman.

"I don't mind for myself," Mrs. Hirtz glanced once out of the window. "But I have two children. Mitzi and Bobby. They're eight and six. Kind of young, don't you think?"

"Kind of," Kay said, touching the woman's hand. "Look, take it easy. Your doctor will be in soon and he'll tell you all you need to know."

"He doesn't know," Mrs. Hirtz said. "That's why I'm here. I've been feeling so weak all along, and nauseous. Just sick, you know? I was picking at the kids all the time. Oh, I wish he'd hurry and come. This coldness scares me."

"Sure it does," Kay agreed. "But worrying about it won't help much. Look, I've got a few things to do on the block then I'll be back, okay?"

The woman nodded, hunching deeper into the blankets.

Kay went out and into the next room, going about her duties quickly. Mr. Wardell was feeling better.

"At least when you know what you've got you can learn to live with it," he had said to Kay after his doctor had diagnosed Meniere's disease.

HOTEL NURSE

"All you've got to do is remember to take your medicine like a good guy," Kay told him. She knew that in most cases, symptoms responded favorably to medication, a no-salt diet, decreasing excessive fluids within the ear canals. In the event this didn't help Mr. Wardell, surgery would be needed, but one step at a time, as Dr. Phelps often told his nurses.

Kay had meant to go right back to Mrs. Hirtz as soon as she found a moment. But the roof caved in on her before she could get to it that morning.

As she passed the charge desk Mrs. Phillips called to her.

"One moment, Miss Mercer," she said. She picked up a chart. "What time did you come on duty this morning?"

"Why, the usual time, around seven-forty-five," Kay said.

"And when you came on duty what did you do?"

"I gave out eight o'clock medications," Kay said. "Then I—"

"You gave medications," Mrs. Phillips looked at Kay. "Did you give the patient in room 411 forty units of insulin?"

"I gave him what was indicated on the chart," Kay said, her heart pounding. What was wrong? What had happened? "Why?" she had to ask the question.

"One moment, Miss Mercer," Mrs. Phillips said. "Will you step into the supply room with me a moment?"

Then Mrs. Phillips turned to Madge at the desk. Madge was all ears. "The moment Miss Anderson comes in, have her come immediately to the supply room."

Walking beside Mrs. Phillips, Kay had a feeling of apprehension. She was dying to ask questions but Mrs. Phillips' back was as straight as her stern face. They entered the small room and Mrs. Phillips sat down on a high stool. She looked at Kay. Just as Kay was about to ask her what this was all about, the young student nurse who had been on the night duty stepped into the room. She, too, looked scared. And

HOTEL NURSE

tired. There were smudges under her eyes and she darted a look at Kay before saying to Mrs. Phillips,

"Yes, Mrs. Phillips?"

"Miss Anderson, I want you to remember well before answering this question. What time did you give an insulin injection of forty units to the patient in room 411."

"That Mrs. Williams?" Miss Anderson said. "I gave her the medication just before I went off duty. I remember it because she said it was bad enough getting wakened early in a hospital but being stuck with a needle made it even worse."

"But I—" Kay clapped a hand over her mouth suddenly.

"That's right, Miss Mercer," Mrs. Phillips stood up, her face angry and red. "You gave the same patient the same dosage just an hour later."

"Oh, my God," Kay cried out. "But I didn't—"

She stopped, stared at the student nurse who looked as though she might be going to cry.

"You didn't know she had had her injection because it wasn't noted on her chart," Mrs. Phillips finished it for her. "Miss Anderson, have you any excuse for that dangerous oversight?"

The student nurse looked sick. She bit her lip and tried hard not to cry. "I guess I was tired. I mean I was doing some studying and I'm so worried about exams and all."

"That is no excuse for carelessness," Mrs. Phillips said. "The patient, fortunately, was not harmed. But in another case, it could be much, much more serious. It could be the difference between life and death. No medication, not even an aspirin, is given without a doctor's prescription and without being noted on the chart!"

"What'll they do to me?" the girl cried out.

"Unfortunately, the patient complained to her doctor; that's how we discovered this error," Mrs. Phillips said.

HOTEL NURSE

"Now it is up to the doctor and to Dr. Phelps. I'm sorry. It's a hard lesson to learn."

"I'll be washed out," the nurse cried.

"Oh, no," Kay turned to the older woman. "Can't you do something, Mrs. Phillips? Can't I be the one to blame? I was the one who should have noticed."

"What? That it wasn't on the chart?" Mrs. Phillips was uncompromising. "The one thing nurses always gripe about to me is patients who complain and grouse all the time. And yet these patients are our best friends. When a patient complains, questions medication, puts up a stink so to speak, the nurse is more aware. But too many patients are afraid to speak up; they don't question. And it isn't their duty to question. We ought to know. We dare not make mistakes. Ever! Here there is no avenue for escape once you have made a mistake."

Just then they heard noise out in the hallway; the door of the supply room was opened and Dr. Phelps strode in. His face looked flushed and his eyes were dark with anger.

"Well?" he said to Mrs. Phillips. "Have you gotten to the bottom of this?"

Mrs. Phillips looked as though she would rather do anything than relate the story she had to tell. But she squared her shoulders. Quietly she told Dr. Phelps what had happened.

"And what are we running here, Mrs. Phillips?" he roared. "A gas station? There is no margin for error in a hospital, Miss, and this error could have cost a patient her life. Do you know the enormity of what was done here today? Do both of you know? Are you aware?"

Kay felt awful, but sorrier still for the student nurse who actually shook in the man's presence.

Dr. Phelps turned to Mrs. Phillips. "You will make a

HOTEL NURSE

thorough investigation of this and of other methods. You will report the incident to the director of nurses."

He turned and stomped out of the room. Kay hugged herself, shivering. Miss Anderson, the young, scared student nurse, burst into tears.

"Okay, that won't help a bit," Mrs. Phillips said. "The only thing you can do now is go to bed and get some rest and be prepared to face De Sorel. She's not nursing director because she's pretty; she's a fair-minded person and she'll hear your stories, both of you. Kay, I suggest you get back on the floor with your patients.

Kay looked at the student nurse who was wiping her eyes. Her heart went out to her. She knew that what had happened was a terrible thing, but she also could understand why and how it had happened. A very tired nurse, a hurried schedule, studies and so little sleep. She had given the injection, then forgotten to note it on the chart. A little thing like that, and yet it could have led to a tragedy. Dr. Phelps was right. There was no margin for error in a hospital. That's what made the work so challenging and so frightening at times.

She didn't feel at all like having lunch. Especially when Madge caught up with her near the elevators.

"Boy, that's some mad-on Dr. Phelps has," Madge said. "He stormed around here like a little Hitler. That poor kid, what'll they do to her? Wash her out?"

"I don't know," Kay said honestly. "It's her senior year. I'd hate to think they'd do that to her.

"It's awful," Madge said. "What about you?"

"Well, I'll be on the carpet, too, I guess," Kay said.

An overwhelming loneliness seized her.

I need Mark, she thought. I want to talk to him. I want to be comforted. I'm scared too. Almost as scared as that young student nurse. After all, like it or not, my fault or not, I'm involved here too.

HOTEL NURSE

She thought she'd get a cup of coffee at least for her lunch. If she felt like it later, she'd eat a chocolate bar she had in her purse. Maybe Mark would be in the cafeteria. She hurried her steps, hoping, almost praying that she'd run into him.

She did. As she started to go into the cafeteria she saw Mark sitting at the table against the wall that had always been their table. His dark head was bent close over the golden head of Penny Adair. They were laughing over something that must have been pretty special because Penny's manicured, red-tipped fingers were clutching Mark's arm.

Kay turned away, before being seen, and went back upstairs. In the nurses' lounge she stretched out on the couch, closing her eyes. She didn't want to think and yet like a picture on a movie screen the scene between Mark and Penny stayed in her mind.

Did a man forget so soon, she wondered. Was that all she'd ever meant to Mark? Just someone to love until another girl, a Penny Adair came along?

One of the nurses came in and shook her by the shoulders.

"Hey, wake up," she said. "You're being paged. The lion's den on the double."

So, the summons to the office of the high lama. Kay squared her shoulders. She was ready for the chewing out, or was she? It'd be ten times as hard for that other poor kid.

"Incredible, utter stupidity and carelessness," Miss De Sorel said coldly, looking first at Kay, then at the student nurse standing in front of her desk. "You, Miss Anderson, can have no excuse whatsoever for not noting medication on the chart as you gave it. Miss Mercer, perhaps your guilt is not as grave, but might it not be a good idea to question a patient whether he or she has had medication lately? Mrs. Williams is a voluble person; did she not say anything to you?"

"No, Miss De Sorel, she did not," Kay said.

HOTEL NURSE

The woman looked at the student nurse. "This will go on your record," she said thinly. "It means that from now on you are walking a tightrope. I'm sorry to make it sound so militant but that is exactly what a hospital is, militant. Patients are at the mercy of the skills, the good judgment, the kindness, the empathy of the doctors and nurses in this hospital. One of the rules, one of the very first rules learned in training is that nothing is left to chance, to conjecture. That's what the patients' charts are for, so a doctor can refer to them, nurses can refer to them. Every inch of treatment is recorded for reference, both present and future. Fortunately, Mrs. Williams was not harmed and her doctor is a reasonable, kind man. The incident will be closed with this interview. Again I must remind you, Miss Anderson, you are on probation now. You cannot afford to have another error in your records. You may go now."

Kay followed the young student nurse out of the office. The girl sagged against the wall a moment, passing a hand over her face. "I don't know," she whispered. "I just don't know. Maybe it's all a mistake, you know? Wanting to be a nurse so much, maybe that's not all that's necessary. Maybe I don't really have whatever it is that makes a good nurse."

"Oh, stop feeling sorry for yourself," Kay said briskly. "And maybe this is a lucky break for you, for me, the whole hospital. We'll all be on our toes twice as much now. Come on, stop beating yourself over the head and hit those books."

"Thanks," the girl said, looking sideways at Kay. "I sure hope I make it."

"It's up to you from here on in," Kay said.

She wished someone would come along and offer her the same comfort and solace. She could use a double dosage of it right now. Not from just someone. From Mark. How long had it been since he'd kissed her? It seemed, why, it seemed that

HOTEL NURSE

he had kissed her in another world, another time. Could they have possibly lost each other in such short a time?

She wanted to run, to fly and find him. But she had her pride, too. That indomitable pride that had carried her up to this point. Let him have his Penny Adair. For how long? Penny Adair was like the mercury in a thermometer, break the glass and she'd disappear. Soon she'd disappear into that other world of hers. Then what?

Hurrying, Kay returned to her floor and her duties.

VI

NOT UNTIL Wednesday did Kay have a chance to speak again with Mark. But by Wednesday, she had met Johnny.

Johnny Riels. Lithe, handsome, mercurial Johnny Riels with music in his bones. But Kay didn't know that the way they met.

She had gone to work at the hotel on Tuesday night, reporting in at four-thirty. After the hospital rush, it was like taking a Swedish bath, Kay told Lorna.

"Well, you missed the fireworks last night," Lorna told her, applying fresh nail polish meticulously to her right thumb. "You know that Hollywood columnist, the old gal who's been around longer than King Lear? Well, they had a bash for her in her suite yesterday afternoon. All the press agents, and studio publicity guys and hangerson, I guess. Did it up all in purple, too, her favorite color.

"You ought to hear what the bellboys call her! She's a real tyrant, complaining about everything from the hot water to traffic in the street. Well, it seems a couple of guys got a little too tanked up and they started to play spin the bottle with some of the chicks brought up from publicity to lend local color; you know the routine. The old gal caught them spinning the bottle on her bedroom floor and blew a front gasket. She kicked the bottle with her dainty little tootsie—she weighs about one hundred fifty—and pulled a ligament.

HOTEL NURSE

You'd have thought she was wounded at a battle the way she carried on. We got an emergency call. Dr. Spence and I rushed up and there she was on that damned purple spread, moaning with one breath and yelling for her studio head the next. What a riot! I must say, though, she won't be doing the twist for a while. With her kind of heft she oughtn't to try to take it on one leg!" Lorna doubled up with laughter. "Want to really laugh? She was wearing support hose! I don't know but it really struck me funny! These flimsy straps for shoes and support hose!"

"It sounds like fun," Kay said.

"Well, it isn't always dull," Lorna said. "I guess we better check supplies and make like good little nurses."

It was their duty, whether they were busy or not, to check the supplies when they came on duty. Nothing must be left to chance. Kay understood and appreciated this boring routine even more so after the incident at the hospital. She told Lorna not to mess her nail polish; she'd do it by herself.

It was good to be alone like this, in the quiet of the supply room, going over the gleaming cabinets, checking the sterilizing equipment, being among familiar things. And yet there was this awful loneliness within her. The past two days had been a nightmare but Mark hadn't been around to give her even so much as a smile. She'd waited for his call but he hadn't so much as tried to reach her. And she'd be darned if she'd be the first to do it! Even if she had said some nasty things to him.

The evening went slowly. She went out to a quick supper and came back to find Lorna busy with two youngsters, visitors with their parents, who'd swallowed bubble bath powder on a dare and were sick to their stomachs. When they got them out of the way by giving them a mild emetic, Luis came in, all smiles this time.

HOTEL NURSE

"See? I am nothing wrong," he said in his slight accent. "I come to pay a visit."

"Good to see you, Luis," Lorna smiled.

"You want some chewing gum?" Luis said.

He produced a dozen packs of chewing gum from his pockets.

"Where did you get all that?" Kay laughed.

"Well, you see, I was walking past this gum machine and I thought I would put in some money and get some gum and I did and it did. I mean, it gave me gum. But so much!"

Lorna howled. "Come on, Luis," she said. "How hard did you kick that machine?"

"Well, not very hard," Luis looked down at the toe of his shoes. "But my brother, he could kick it very hard. He has iron in the toes of his shoes, you know that? He works for a company that gives him shoes with iron in the toes."

"Those are called safety shoes," Lorna said. "Men wear them in factories to protect their toes against injuries."

"And they're good for kicking gum machines, too," Luis said seriously.

"Just don't let anyone catch you at it or they'll kick you right into the hoosegow," Lorna said.

"Miss Mercer," Luis smiled at Kay. "I been meaning to ask you. Are you married, yes?"

"I am married, no," Kay laughed. "Why do you ask?"

"Because some day I might want to ask you for a date," he said seriously. "And if you are married, I would not want to do that."

"If I were married, I would not want you to do that either," she said.

"Well, I better get back to work before they all miss me."

"They'll send out an alarm for their favorite employee," Lorna teased.

HOTEL NURSE

"Oh? Who told you I am a favorite employee?" Luis asked, frowning.

"I said. You are my favorite employee," Lorna said.

"For that, I will bring you coffee at exactly nine o'clock. On the house," he said. He waved and went out.

"He's a living doll, that guy," Lorna said.

The phone rang and Lorna picked it up. "Medical," she said sweetly. She listened a moment, then nodded and hung up.

"Woman in 805, hysterical," she said. "Her husband walked out on her. I'll get Dr. Spence."

She rushed toward Dr. Spence's office and in a second both Lorna and Dr. Spence rushed out of medical, the doctor carrying his black bag with him.

Kay sat down at the desk, picking up a pad and pen and thinking she might write a letter to Ruthie. The phone rang almost immediately. She picked it up, imitating Lorna. "Medical," she said.

A man's voice answered. "Get someone up to 1011 quick. We need a doctor."

"What—" Kay started to ask what was wrong but the party hung up.

Kay stared at the phone. Dr. Spence was in 805. She'd call the switchboard and tell them to contact him. Meanwhile, she'd have to go to 1011 herself and see what was wrong.

She made a hurried call, then rushed out of Medical and to the elevators. It could be anything and it could be nothing. She prayed Dr. Spence got the message right away and that his other patient was all right. Dr. Blank would have to be out tonight.

The elevator deposited Kay on the tenth floor and she walked swiftly, silently on the red embossed thick pile rug, to room 1011. She barely had time to knock when the door

HOTEL NURSE

was opened and a young, intense man in shirt sleeves pulled her into the room.

"She's in here; for God's sake, do something!" he said, rushing Kay along. The girl was lying on the bed in a thin negligee. Her skin was pale, almost translucent and as Kay leaned over to take her pulse she noticed not only her pallor but the clamminess of her flesh.

"What happened to her?" she asked.

"Darn fool kid," the young man ran a frenzied hand through his thick, dark hair. "She's taken a bottle of Nembutal at least. Look, her name is Suzy and she's a singer with my band. I have a combo down in the Meridian Room. She's my singer, but she got herself loused up with some married guy and he won't divorce his wife for her. It's the same old messy story and Suzy's too good a kid to get mixed up in it. I kept telling her but she's headstrong as all hell. She thought she'd make things come to a head, make him decide one way or the other so she took the damn pills to get him to heel, I guess.

"Well, he didn't. He called me, the ugly bastard." He banged a fist against the bed table.

"I can't get mixed up in this,' that's what he told me. The kid's dying and he can't get mixed up in this! Do something, for God's sake, can't you? Suzy, baby, wake up, will you? It's me, Johnny, your old pal Johnny Riels. Come on, baby, he's not worth it, no one's worth it."

"You can't help her that way, Mr. Riels," Kay said. "I'll call an ambulance. She's got to get to a hospital, fast. How long ago did it happen? Have you any idea?"

"No, I don't know," he said. "He called me about a half hour ago. I came right over. I don't live too far. Why? Can't you do something for her? Shouldn't we get her on her feet or something?"

"I'm calling the hospital," she said. "They'll send an ambu-

HOTEL NURSE

lance. Meanwhile, I'll try to get Dr. Spence up here. He's the hotel doctor on call tonight. He's seeing another patient right now."

She picked up the phone but Johnny bounded across the bed and caught her wrist, tearing the phone away from her.

"No! Not the ambulance!" he yelled. "Good God, no!"

"She'll die if we don't get her to a hospital and pump out her stomach," Kay yelled back at him.

"We can't let it get out—the publicity! I'll be in soup and so will she! You don't know how a thing like this can affect your whole life. Look, what the hell kind of nurse are you anyway? Why can't you help her? And where's that god-damned doctor?"

"If you'll let me use that phone," Kay said furiously. "I'll get him!"

She picked up the phone and called the switchboard. But before she could ask for Dr. Spence, he came into the room, followed by Lorna. He went right to the girl on the bed, leaning over, taking her in with one swift glance, then listening to her heart.

"Overdose?" he said quickly.

"I've been trying to call an ambulance," Kay said, glaring at Johnny. "But he won't let me. He's scared of publicity for the hotel and his band!"

"She's got to get to a hospital," Dr. Spence took his stethoscope away from the girl's inert body. "Right now!"

"You can't do anything?" Johnny put out both hands in a childish appeal.

The doctor glanced at the girl, then at Johnny.

"Well, okay, maybe not an ambulance," he said. "Can you get a car round the back? Delivery entrance?"

"Give me five," Johnny said.

"All right, get it there," Dr. Spence said. "I'll carry her down there. Maybe we can get her admitted with little pub-

HOTEL NURSE

licity. Nurse, contact the hospital; tell them I'm bringing in the patient. Emergency. Wait. I can't go through a hallway carrying a girl on my back. Get one of the busboys to bring me up one of the wheelchairs. I can bundle her up and get her down to the delivery entrance that way. Okay, let's go."

Kay ran out of the room and down to medical. She called for a busboy and dispatched the wheelchair to room 1011. Then she put in the call to the hospital. By that time a man was leading a woman into Medical. She was a thin, slight woman with a deep tan. Both of them had deep tans, as a matter of fact.

"It's my wife," the man said. "I called the other nurse, I guess. She's got a million needles in her eyes, she says."

"What happened, sir?"

"Mr. MacIssen," the man said. "Well, we just got back from Brazil and my wife had trouble down there, too. The sun bothered her eyes and I had to take her to a doctor. She just blanked out and her eyes hurt, like this. How do they feel, honey? Like the last time?"

"Like I have something in my eye, only it isn't just one thing, it's a million things." She tried to smile, but kept her hands over her eyes.

"Did you do anything to aggravate this condition?" Kay asked. "Cosmetics? Eye makeup?"

"No, no," the woman said. "Well, I didn't want to lose my tan so I had a sun lamp sent up to our room and I sat under it."

"With dark glasses on?"

"Well, no," she said sheepishly.

"And maybe you looked right into the sunlamp?"

"Maybe I did," she admitted.

"I think you've gotten a sunburn in your eyes," Kay smiled. "Actually, it isn't dangerous. I'll put some drops in your eyes to put them to sleep. It's something like ether; it'll deaden all

HOTEL NURSE

pain in your eyes. Then I'll cover them and you must keep them covered until tomorrow night. Do not use your eyes for anything at all. You'll be beached, I'm afraid, for about twenty-four hours."

"Anything's better than this," the woman said. "I can't even close them to sleep, they hurt so much."

Kay took care of the woman, who thanked her profusely. Her husband led her out of the medical department.

Kay looked at the clock on the wall. Ten o'clock. Well, it hadn't been a restful evening at that. She wondered what Lorna was doing, probably still with that hysterical woman patient. She picked up the phone to call Betty, hoping that there'd be a message from Mark for her, but then put the phone back in the cradle. No sense in waking Betty up if she was asleep.

She was sitting quietly thinking about Mark when the door opened and Johnny Riels walked in. He looked haggard. His eyes had dark circles and his hand shook slightly as he took out a cigarette and sat down in one of the yellow leather chairs facing Kay.

"She's going to be all right, I guess," he said. "Dr. Spence said she hadn't really taken too much. Chickened out or passed out. Poor kid. What a lousy way to bungle up a life."

"Is she, does she mean something special to you?" Kay asked gently.

"Suzy? Not in the way you mean. She's like a kid sister. I like her. I worry about her. This isn't for her, killing herself over a creep like that john she picked out. Suzy ought to be out on a farm somewhere, raising chickens and ten kids. But, boy, she's got to be a singer!"

"Is she good?"

"That's the trouble, she is," he admitted. "She isn't even much of a singer. She kind of picks up that mike and talks

HOTEL NURSE

into it with that tiny baby voice of hers that cracks on a high note and the people love it."

"A blues singer."

"One of the few left," Johnny admitted. "Hey, I want to apologize, you know, for mouthing off up there."

"Did you mouth off?" Kay grinned.

"You're okay," Johnny made a circle with his index finger and thumb. "How about some coffee or something to make it up to you?"

"Nothing to make up for," Kay said. "That's my job."

"Well, I gave you a rough time about that ambulance deal. But you can see what it'd do for everyone, even the kid. She might not be able to get jobs. You know, it's a lousy world. Peg you for a screw and they can't rely on you."

"It's okay as long as it turned out all right," Kay said.

"So it is. Bad show but the notices were all right," He grinned, got up. He straightened his tie and buttoned his coat. "Well, got to get to work."

"Now?" Kay asked, glancing at the clock.

"I should have been at work two hours ago," he said. "But I got Soapy to cover for me at the piano."

"You play the piano?"

"I try. Say, want to come down for an hour or so?" he asked.

"I have to be at work at seven-thirty in the morning, Mr. Riels."

"Johnny," he said. "Call my Johnny. You work days, too?"

She explained briefly about subbing for Ruthie.

"Well, then, how about Friday or Saturday night?" he said. "I want to show you I'm grateful."

"You don't have to, Johnny," she says.

"I don't have to do anything. I do what I want to do." He leaned over the desk and touched her cheek lightly with a finger. "Friday night? Hey, what's your name?"

HOTEL NURSE

"Kay Mercer."

"Friday night, Kay Mercer," he said, and went out of the room. Unaccountably, Kay felt as she had when she'd been in high school and a particular boy had asked her for a date.

But that's silly, she told herself. Why on earth should I feel giddy over a half-date like that? What I want more than anything in the world is to spend Friday night and every night in the week with Mark.

She was still musing about this when Dr. Spence called on the phone.

"All okay here," he told her. "She's a plucky kid and won't try this again for a long time. Everything quiet there?"

"Dr. Walters is just walking in," she told him, smiling at the slim young doctor who came into the door. "We're fine here, doctor."

"Good, then I'll go home to wife and hearth," he laughed. "See you tomorrow night, nurse."

"Good night, doctor," she said.

Wife and hearth. It sounded like a piece of heaven waiting right off the bus line somewhere out in the suburbs.

VII

"HOW ARE YOU feeling this morning, Mrs. Hirtz?" Kay smiled at the young woman on the bed, deftly removing the thermometer from her lips, reading it and noting it on the chart, then shaking it down and returning it to the vial of alcohol.

The woman turned her head away from Kay.

"Hey, what's with the cold shoulder?" Kay said. "Just when I was going to ask if you want me to draw your bath, madam."

"You don't have to pretend with me," Mrs. Hirtz said. "I know I'm going to die."

"Yes?" Kay said, busying herself with a pan of water, getting a washcloth out of the night table, clean towel, soap.

"Ever since I came here, I've known." She lifted an arm and stared at it. Then she looked at the area on her chest which wasn't exposed to the air. There was diffuse tanning over the area and multiple freckles. "There's something terribly wrong with me, so terrible even the doctors don't know. And I feel so weak." She dropped her hand on the sheet. "Nurse, how does it feel to die?"

Kay was going to try to make light of it but she was struck by the fear in the woman's eyes, the bleakness there. "I don't know," she said honestly. "You didn't expect me to lie, did you?"

"No," Mrs. Hirtz smiled fleetingly. "It's my feet, they're so

HOTEL NURSE

cold all the time. I can't get warm. It's like I'm dying by inches; it's creeping up on me."

"Look, why don't you try to hang onto yourself until your doctor completes his tests?"

"I've had so many tests now," Mrs. Hirtz said. "Basal metabolism, X-rays, something to do with an electrical thing."

"Electrocardiograph," Kay said quickly.

"It's the not knowing, I guess."

"Of course it is," Kay told her. "Look, I've got to get on with these temps. But I'll be back real soon. Okay?"

"Okay," Mrs. Hirtz said.

Kay went quickly, quietly about her duties. If occasionally she glanced up and down a corridor hoping to see Mark, she didn't let on to anyone, least of all to herself.

At noon, Kay debated going down to the cafeteria for lunch or grabbing a cup of coffee and snoozing for a half hour in the nurses' lounge. The latter sounded infinitely more appetizing until one of the other nurses grabbed her for lunch.

"Come on, eat with me," she said, punching the elevator button. "Hey, did you hear? For Penny's first show they're going to film an entire segment right here in the hospital. With real doctors and maybe some of us in the arena."

"I didn't hear," Kay said. "How come Dr. Phelps is allowing that?"

"Public relations," the nurse, Ellen Tierney, said. "He said, quote, 'This will be a fine way to present the true image of Deepwood to the general public, so long as it is done with taste.' End of quote."

"Well, I didn't know a hospital had to have an image," Kay said.

The moment she entered the cafeteria, she saw Mark. Just the sight of his dark head bent forward over his cup of coffee, elbows scrunched on the table, his eyes intent on getting

HOTEL NURSE

across something to one of the interns, made her toes curl. She wanted to rush over and touch him, make him see her, notice her. Instead she took a tray and blindly picked up dishes from the counter, got her coffee, followed Ellen to a table.

I will not look at him, she thought. I will pretend he is not even here. But try as she might, she couldn't keep her eyes from straying quickly, beseechingly toward Mark every few minutes.

Ellen rattled on about some new boy friend of hers. Kay made appropriate comments because Ellen didn't seem surprised at anything she said.

Then Mark pushed back his chair and stood up. As he turned, he saw her. For a second, their eyes met and then he was walking over toward her quickly.

He nodded to Ellen, touched Kay on the shoulder.

"Kay," his voice held a world of meaning in it. "I haven't seen you around lately."

"I've been busy," she said pointedly.

"New job okay?"

"Yes, it's okay," she said, looking up into his eyes. Was that all they had to say to each other? Talk about a job? It was so inane. She wanted to know if he was still angry with her, if he was still seeing Penny Adair. She wanted him to pick her up and hold her and nuts to everyone else in the entire hospital. Mark smiled at Ellen, then squeezed Kay's shoulder. A message? Was he trying to convey a different meaning to her? After all, he couldn't say much in front of Ellen, that was true.

"See you around," he said.

Kay nodded, not trusting herself to speak. Ellen grinned at Mark's receding back. "Brother, he sure makes Penny Adair sparkle when she's around him," Ellen said. "You know, I have a theory about women like that. No kidding, I don't

HOTEL NURSE

think they are really women like us; they can't be. They're kind of like make-believe people. She's always on stage if you know what I mean. Boy, to see her and Dr. Mark Bell going out of this place late last night you'd think this place was being set up as her private personal sound stage."

"Oh?" Kay felt her hand tremble slightly as she started to push back her chair. "Going out of here last night?"

"Yes, she called for him in full regalia. Ohhh, you should have seen what she was wearing. One of those long dresses, all beaded, pink. She looked like a Christmas tree out for a walk, she sparkled so."

I won't ask where they were going, Kay told herself. I don't really want to know. Because I don't care anymore. Pink beaded dress. Christmas tree out for a walk. Anything that wasn't sterile in this place was striking. Kay felt a momentary dislike for the young nurse beside her and then was instantly sorry for her bad humor.

On her floor, she busied herself before visiting hours came around and the usual hubbub that accompanied the hour and a half. Kay often wondered why sick people wanted visitors. If they were recuperating, it might be therapeutic for them to visit with loved ones, but sick people should be allowed to get well quickly and quietly.

She found time to pop in on Mrs. Hirtz a moment, but Mrs. Hirtz was napping. She was anxious to know how Mrs. Hirtz was doing. The woman had touched her somehow. She was being so quietly brave and yet agonizingly frightened. When she saw Mrs. Phillips talking with Mrs. Hirtz' doctor, she made it a point to find a moment to ask Mrs. Phillips about her.

"Has Mrs. Hirtz' doctor seen her?" she asked Mrs. Phillips. "This morning she seemed to be agitated."

Mrs. Phillips looked at Kay shrewdly. "Getting involved with your patients, Miss Mercer?"

HOTEL NURSE

"No, not exactly," Kay flushed. "Well, I do like Mrs. Hirtz. It's just that she was so scared."

"Her doctor has completed his diagnosis," Mrs. Phillips reached around to the chart rack, pulled the metal chart out of the rack and looked at it. "Mrs. Hirtz has Addison's disease."

"Oh!" It was an involuntary intake of breath Kay couldn't help.

"It's not as bad as all that," Mrs. Phillips smiled briefly. "With caution, good care, Mrs. Hirtz can lead a normal, useful life."

"But she'll need medication the rest of her days," Kay said.

"That, and diet and constant control. She'll be her doctor's favorite patient, seeing him once a week like clock-work," Mrs. Phillips said. "Now, Miss Mercer, will you take care of two o'clock medications? Mrs. White has been taken ill. Actually, I sent her home with a bad cold," she frowned at Kay. "A nurse and she doesn't take good care of herself. Come, I'll unlock the medicine cabinet for you, check the charts. Oh, excuse me a moment," she picked up the ringing phone.

"Yes, Doctor. I'll attend to it right away." She hung up.

"Never mind, Miss Mercer, I'll take care of medications. Will you see if Mrs. Hirtz is awake and if so, call her husband. Dr. Porter wants to talk to both of them. Her husband may be on his way here right now."

Kay went on down the hallway. She was happy for Mrs. Hirtz, in a way, and yet to know one had a lifelong incurable disease was a blow that needed strength and courage to live with. She wished she could spare this tiny little woman the news. At least her husband would be with her when she was told.

Mrs. Hirtz was just coming out of her sleep. Kay brought

HOTEL NURSE

her a basin of water to freshen up and handed her her purse with her lipstick in it. She looked like a plucky little gal who'd find ways to cope with this. And after all, she did have her husband and children to live for; that was more than lots of people in this hospital had.

During visiting hours, Kay caught up with her chart work. She found a moment, too, to get a cup of coffee and call home to see if Betty was there. She hadn't spoken to her the night before about dinner. Kay was finding that two jobs kept her hopping like a frog in a pond. She had barely had time to talk with her own sister these past few days.

There was no answer in the apartment. Kay went back on duty.

As usual, she was twenty minutes late getting off the floor when it was time for her to leave. Then she had a message to stop off and see Flora Buier, one of the old time nurses on the first floor. Flora wanted to see her about a collection for a gift as a going away present to Dr. Chu Min, one of the foreign exchange doctors who was leaving Deepwood to return to his native country and practice medicine there.

"We're making it a quarter a piece," Flora told her. "It's not the gift; it's the thought, know what I mean? He's been a nice guy and we want him to take happy memories home with him."

"Oh, sure," Kay rummaged in her purse for a quarter and handed it to Flora. "I hope you gals all do the same for me when I decide to take off."

"Let us know when you're quitting," Flora laughed.

Flora was the kind of person who would take up a collection for a cat having kittens and Kay didn't really mind because she had known Dr. Min since his first days as a foreign exchange doctor. She recalled how scrupulously he memorized abbreviations used in medical terminology such as GI for asterointestinal and GYN for gynecology and a host of

HOTEL NURSE

others. It got to be a standard joke around Deepwood trying to determine whether the good doctor was talking Chinese or spouting a medical abbreviation.

Kay lingered only a moment or so as she walked out of the big glass doors of Deepwood. Mark knew when she went off duty. Mark knew she always went out the big front doors. Other times he'd be waiting there for a quick word with her, a date. Tonight he wasn't there, and he hadn't been the last few nights.

Squaring her shoulders, Kay walked resolutely out of the hospital. A few blocks away in her apartment the phone rang and rang and rang. No one was there to answer it. In his quarters, Mark put down the phone with a frown on his face. He glanced at his watch, then ground out his cigarette. He picked up the phone again and dialed for an outside line. From a slip of paper tucked under the phone, he ticked off the numbers, then waited as the phone on the other end rang and rang.

Finally someone picked it up. "Hello?" the girl-voice held a faint note of surprise in it, as it always did.

"Penny?" Mark's face broke into a grin. "Mark."

"I know," she said.

VIII

KAY SAT at a small table for two, toying with a drink in front of her, and listening to Johnny Riels playing the piano.

In the past week she had seen Mark only twice, since their encounter in the cafeteria. Once she had accompanied him and Dr. Weeks on morning rounds in the wards on the fifth floor. The other time had been a shambles. The television company producing Penny's film was taking what they called canned shots that were to be used again and again in introducing Penny's nurse program. There were huge cameras on dollies closing in on Mark and Penny as they came into the corridor, met, and walked away from the camera together. Then there was another shot of Penny and Mark in the emergency admitting room. It was explained to Kay that these two shots with an exterior of Deepwood would introduce the program and serve as background. The actual filming of the rest of the program would take place in a studio made up to look like a hospital ward but the illusion henceforth would be that all filming was taking place right in the hallowed halls of Deepwood.

It gave Kay a twinge to see Mark walking with Penny, and she hadn't stayed around to see too much of the show. When one night she had come back to the apartment from her hotel job to learn from Betty that Mark had been there, she was oddly glad that she hadn't been there.

HOTEL NURSE

"What does he expect me to do? Sit on a fence until he's ready to whistle?" she demanded of Betty angrily.

"Don't get sore at me," Betty had yawned. "I tried to get him to wait until you got home but he said he had to get back on duty. Kay, have you two had a fight?"

"Whatever gave you that idea?" Kay asked.

Fight! It sounded as though they were eight-year olds who'd had a squabble over a toy. No, they hadn't had a fight but somewhere along the line they'd gotten off on separate tracks. If Mark wanted to see her, or make a date with her, why didn't he call her when he knew where she was? Or was he still sulking about the hotel job?

Well, she could sulk, too. He wasn't exactly unhappy about his association with Penny Adair. If gossip around the hospital was true, and usually gossip around any hospital had some basis for truth, Dr. Mark Bell was having himself quite a ball with the newest television starlet. And good luck to him, Kay thought, nursing her short drink now in the Madrid Room of the Hanes Hotel where Johnny was bending over the piano bringing out some pretty wild jazz.

She'd gotten to know Johnny a little better since that awful night with Suzy. He'd made it a point to stop by and see her again and tell her Suzy was going to be okay.

"She's going home for a little while, home in Indiana," he said. "She'll square herself away all right now. Trouble with Suzy, she got so close to this thing she couldn't see her way out of it and panicked."

"I'm glad," Kay had said, meaning it.

That was when Johnny insisted that she come down to the Madrid Room that Saturday night when she got off duty at eleven.

"See how we night birds live," he'd winked.

Kay was glad she was here. Not just because of Johnny, whom she was beginning to like, but because it felt good to

HOTEL NURSE

be sitting here in this warm, intimate room listening to good music, hearing the tinkle of glasses, being with people who were gay and happy.

Johnny finished playing and came over to sit with her for a while. He ordered a Coke and lit a cigarette.

"This place isn't like that sterile atmosphere you're used to, I'll bet," he teased, hunching over the table to look at her. "Tell me, why does a pretty girl like you want to be a nurse anyway?"

Kay laughed. "Touché," she said. "Now you've got that line out of the way, I'll get mine in. How does a talented guy like you stay with only this? Why not bigger and better things?"

"Time, lady, give me time," he said. "Heck, I like what I'm doing. When I was a kid I took up the big D, you know, bass drum. I drove the neighbors nuts plunking on that thing on summer nights with the windows open."

Kay laughed. "I can just bet you did."

"I used to make music with combs, you know the bit. One day when I was in the fourth grade my teacher sent for my father. She said I was being disobedient and insulting."

"Were you?"

"What?"

"Insulting?"

"Sure," Johnny grinned. "I was put in the back to keep out of her hair, I guess. So I started throwing kisses at her. She told my father to make me stop throwing kisses at her."

"I guess you were a naughty little boy."

"I don't know," he touched her hand on the table, held her fingers a moment. "I still like to throw kisses, but not at little girls and not long distance."

Gently Kay disengaged her hand. "I don't think you've grown up too much," she said, feeling oddly shaken at the way he looked at her. She knew, with sudden clarity, that if

HOTEL NURSE

he kissed her she'd let him. And where did that leave her feelings for Mark? What kind of person was she, then?

Johnny leaned over and touched her nose. "Got to play for the customers. There's a little woman on the other side of the room celebrating her forty-third wedding anniversary. I'm going to play a song for her. And for you," he said, getting up.

The next half hour Kay was entranced. He not only played The Anniversary Waltz, but a medley of old love songs and new love songs that held everybody's attention. Johnny could do that. He knew how to grab an audience and keep them where he wanted until he let them go.

Kay had no idea of time until Johnny came back to the table and took her elbow, helping her up. "Come on," he said. "I've done my stint for tonight. I want to take you somewhere."

"Oh?" Kay followed him out of the room. Johnny asked her to wait a moment while he got his coat, then he retrieved her coat from the checking room. Together they walked down the wide red carpeted doorway, down the broad stairway into the street where Johnny hailed a cab.

"Johnny, it's late," Kay said.

"It's early by my clock," he said, hugging her close by his side in the cab. "No kidding, I want you to hear this. We're going downtown to a little club where some of my musician friends hang out after we're through playing for the peasants. This is for us. You'll enjoy it."

The club was a small room in a loft building and after Kay went in with Johnny she knew why it was situated here in this out of the way place. The musicians gathered here did not want to be disturbed nor did they want to disturb anyone who didn't understand them and their music. Johnny found a small table for her and then took off his coat, loosened his tie and went over to the piano where another man

HOTEL NURSE

was caressing the keys lazily. The other man looked up at Johnny, nodded, and moved off the piano stool. Johnny took over.

And now Kay heard music such as she had never heard, improvised music, sweet and low, sad and haunting. There was jazz that tingled, and time was forgotten as the men played because they loved every sound and every tone that came out of their instruments. Once during the evening a good-looking young colored girl, wearing what was obviously a gown she'd worn in a show, stood up and sang and Kay had goosepimples as she listened. It wasn't a room in a loft building anymore, but a wharf in New Orleans and a man and a boy, and the sun was hot and sweet and their blood ran wild. When it was over, Kay felt like crying.

As abruptly as they had come in, Johnny left the piano, waved to his friends, came over to Kay and picked up their coats.

"Let's go," he said.

It was after three in the morning when they hit the street. There wasn't a cab in sight. "Let's walk up to the avenue; usually we can pick up something there," Johnny said, tucking her hand in his pocket.

Kay turned to look at Johnny sideways.

"Do I say anything?"

"Not unless you want to."

"Thanks."

He grinned, squeezed her hand.

They stepped along in the cold night air, and Kay felt as though she were being shown a new world.

"I've seen it like this from a hospital window, early morning hours, wondering who would be crazy enough not to be in bed," she said wonderingly. "I thought night people were mostly doctors and nurses."

HOTEL NURSE

"Night people are all over," Johnny said to her. "Didn't you know? They're special, like you. And me."

"I like this," she said.

"I'll top that," Johnny told her. "I like you."

Before she could answer, he stopped dead in the street and turned to her. "I've been wanting to kiss you all night."

His lips were gentle on her mouth and then his kiss became hard and she felt herself drawn up into this man's whole being. His hands didn't caress her but every inch of her was aware of him as they stood poised on the dark empty street for a moment, kissing.

"Look, honey, don't let me kiss you like that unless you mean it," he said softly. "You could get to be a habit with me."

She pushed away from him, thrust her hands in her pockets and started to walk away. He caught up with her, turned her around to face him.

"What did I say wrong?"

"Nothing," she said, "Nothing."

"Is there a reason why I shouldn't kiss you?"

She thought of Mark. Was he a reason not to let Johnny kiss her? Not anymore. Mark seemed to have moved away from her so far these past few days and weeks that it was as though he was a memory.

"No, Johnny," she said. "I just don't like being another one of Johnny's girls, maybe. I don't know, exactly. You're from a different world. To you a kiss is nothing. I guess I'm not as sophisticated about kissing as show people are." Was she thinking of Penny Adair as she said that?

"Hey, come off it," Johnny chuckled. "I kissed you because you're a pretty girl and because I wanted to and because I think I could fall in love with you."

"No, Johnny, don't make jokes."

"No, no jokes," he said, hugging her suddenly, close against

HOTEL NURSE

him. "I never joke about something that is going to be mighty serious to me. Come on, let me take you home."

They turned up toward the avenue and Johnny flagged a cruising cab. In ten minutes they were at her door. Johnny went up to the door and turned her around. He kissed her gently on the mouth.

"Good night," he said. "Tomorrow night?"

"Good night, Johnny," she said.

But she didn't say she would see him tomorrow night. Tomorrow seemed such a long way off even though it was today. She had to sort out her feelings. If she loved Mark, why did she allow Johnny to kiss her? And why did she go with him tonight?

Kay had a troubled sleep that night. The next day, Sunday, she had intended to sleep half the day, then do her hair and nails before reporting to work again at four at the hotel.

She was awakened by the ringing of bells. They seemed to be piercing her ears. She fought off her sleep and started to get up when she realized it was the phone. Betty, in the twin bed on the other side of the room, moaned and covered her head with a blanket.

"Hello?" Kay's voice sounded husky and sleepy, her tongue fuzzy.

"Miss Mercer, this is Mrs. Phillips." The voice sounded like crisp celery. It made Kay slide down under the covers for protection. "Are you there, Miss Mercer?"

"Yes, I'm here," she managed to say.

"I'm sorry to awaken you but we've had a bad accident. A bus. We're terribly short-handed and need nurses right away. Can you come in for extra duty?"

"But, Mrs. Phillips," she shook her head to clear it. "It's . . . what time is it?"

"Nine o'clock," Mrs. Phillips said. "There are small chil-

HOTEL NURSE

dren, Miss Mercer. It was a busload of people going to West Point on a tour. Can you make it?"

Nine o'clock. She had had exactly four and a half hours sleep. Kay nodded her head then spoke tiredly into the phone. "I'll come."

"Good, as soon as you can. And thank you."

Thank you, thank you, thank you. I don't want to be a nurse; I want to be pampered and petted and kissed on a Sunday morning. Kay shook off the thought like a wet puppy shakes off rain and dragged herself out of bed.

"Is it still night?" Betty peeked out of the covers.

Kay told her as quickly as she could what had happened.

"Oh, gosh, you can't go down there now!" Betty sat up. "You'll knock yourself out! Why didn't you say no?"

"Oh, I don't know," Kay pulled clothes off a hanger. "Why did I answer the darn phone at all? My head!"

"I know," Betty said, sitting up in bed and hugging her knees. "What time did you come in and was it Mark?"

"I got in as the papers were being delivered and it wasn't Mark," she said. "Bets, get me some coffee, will you?"

"Sure," Betty got out of bed, slipping on a robe. "If it wasn't Mark, who was it?"

"Johnny down at the hotel," she said, going into the shower. "Don't ask questions now, Bets, I'm still half asleep. And I have to work tonight!"

"Then you had better stay home and sleep tomorrow or you'll be your own private patient," Betty said. "No kidding, you're smarter than to kill yourself."

"I know, I know," Kay said, coming out of the bathroom for a towel. "But I promise that tomorrow night I'll get into bed at five o'clock and sleep until five the next morning!"

She got to the hospital within the hour. It was something like the Christmas rush at Grand Central Station in New

HOTEL NURSE

York City. Emergency was cluttered up with relatives and friends and police all asking questions and milling around.

Since it was Sunday everyone available had been called into service. Kay saw Mark bending over a stretcher in the hallway, giving orders to a nurse by his side. Kay was sent into one of the examining rooms to assist Dr. Harvard. A man and a woman, obviously husband and wife because they kept trying to talk to one another, were lying on stretchers and Dr. Harvard was applying a green splint bandage to the woman's ankle. The man was bleeding from the forehead and Kay quickly went about getting sterile bandages, clips to sterilize and cover the wound. It was a nasty head wound that would require stitching; she could see that immediately.

"This'll do fine for now," the doctor told the woman. "Nurse, will you clean up this patient while I—"

Before he could finish, Kay gave a sharp cry and bent over the man. "Doctor!"

"His heart . . . his heart!" The woman on the stretcher tried to get up.

Dr. Harvard was beside Kay in a moment. Quickly, deftly, he forced the man's mouth open, pushing back his tongue, then leaning over to breathe into his mouth with strong, steady breaths. With his eyes, he made motions to Kay. She knew immediately he meant the oxygen. She'd seen heart failures before.

But there was no oxygen in this room. She ran outside in the corridor and seeing Mark, right to him.

"Mark, oxygen, the man in there has heart failure. Dr. Harvard," she grabbed Mark's arm.

"Nurse," Mark called to another nurse. "Take this patient to X-ray. Come with me, Kay," he said.

She ran after him into another examining room where the oxygen apparatus was. Together they wheeled it to the next room where Dr. Harvard was still bending over the patient,

HOTEL NURSE

trying to get him to breathe. Quickly Mark set up the oxygen, put the mask over the man's face.

"Adrenalin," the doctor said to Kay. He leaned over the man, checking his pulse, listening for a heart beat. He looked up at Mark. Kay brought the adrenalin and with a quick motion Dr. Harvard injected it into the man. All three waited and time seemed to stand still around them. Even the man's wife was quiet, containing herself. Mark leaned over and then suddenly it was there, one sudden lurch and the man's heart picked up the beat again; color began to come back to his face.

Dr. Harvard looked at Mark and grinned, turned to the man's wife. "He'll be all right now," he said.

"Thank God, thank God," the woman wept quietly.

Mark looked at Kay and winked. He seemed about to say something when he was called out of the room.

Kay didn't see him again by the time she left at a little past twelve, when the immediate emergency had subsided and the patients taken care of. Wearily, she went home to sleep for a couple of hours before going to her hotel job.

Tonight she wondered at the wisdom of trying to moonlight on her job, as Mark had called it. Perhaps he had had a right to be angry. Surely a nurse who was bone weary and ached for sleep wasn't much of a nurse. But she had made a bargain with Ruthie and she couldn't back out now. Besides, there was Johnny. She'd made a date with him for tonight.

IX

ENTERING THE Hanes Hotel at a little before four that afternoon, Kay looked like anything but a nurse who only hours before had labored in a hospital emergency room.

She'd gone home to a hot hot bath and a meal cooked by Betty, then an hour and a half of sleep. When Betty woke her to tell her she was leaving, she was meeting some friends for supper, Kay felt better than she thought she would. She dressed in a slim red mohair sheath and applied her makeup carefully. Her eyes were clearer now than they were this morning and her spirits had picked up amazingly. Was it because of that few minutes with Mark this morning? That awareness of one another? She'd hugged that feeling all morning and into her short sleep this afternoon. She'd half expected, actually, to awaken and find a message from Mark waiting for her.

Still, she was in good spirits as she walked into the hotel lobby. It was a rainy, wet day outside but the moment her feet touched the soft red carpeting a feeling of luxury and well being suffused her. It was always this way when she entered the hotel. Unlike the hospital with its sterile medicinal air, the pale green walls and the white of the nurses and interns, here in the hotel there was color and beauty and excitement. One felt it just beyond each door, around a corner, when the elevator doors opened noiselessly to let out well dressed people or to admit others.

HOTEL NURSE

Up in medical, Lorna was clipping the Sunday newspaper fiendishly.

"It's good therapy for me," she informed Kay. "I cut out all the beautiful clothes I would buy if I could afford it and stack the clippings by my telephone at home. Even though I never order a thing, it makes me feel good to know the clothes are there."

"You have flipped," Kay laughed.

"Everyone is entitled to one private neurosis; this is mine," Lorna grinned. "Dr. Spence is on today and chomping. He was supposed to have off this Sunday but it didn't work out for him."

Dr. Spence himself came into the reception room just then. "Did Dr. Blank say anything about leaving a paper for me to read?" he asked. "He's preparing it for the AMA and he wanted me to go through it for him."

"Right here," Lorna reached into a desk drawer and brought out a manila envelope. "What's it about, Dr. Spence?"

"Something about migraine," Dr. Spence said. "He's a bug on that. I sometimes wonder he doesn't specialize in neurosurgery. He'd be great."

"So would you," Kay said. "Isn't that why he asked you to read the paper?"

Dr. Spence looked a bit embarrassed. "I admit it intrigues me. But I've got a family now and going back to specialize . . . I don't know. Midge would be behind me one hundred percent. Midge is my wife—a great gal. But once through medical school and Midge working is enough."

"Then you knew each other a long time?" Kay asked in way of conversation.

"I think we reincarnated together," Dr. Spence laughed. "Sometimes that's good, sometimes wow! She knows what I'm thinking before I speak."

The way he said it, Kay immediately felt the strong bond

HOTEL NURSE

between the two and it gave her a twinge of jealousy quite out of order. She thought of Mark, did they have the same rapport? And how did someone like Dr. Spence and his wife know, how were they so sure? Was there a thermometer that could measure the depth and breadth of love?

The phone on the desk rang and Lorna picked it up.

"Medical," she said brightly. Then, "Yes, of course. Right away. Room 1206."

She hung up and turned to the doctor. "Heart patient who says he is having a bad attack of indigestion. Room 1206. Will you go up or should he come down?"

"I'll go see him," Dr. Spence said. "Just in case, check oxygen equipment. More than likely he's been overindulging and only needs a sedative."

He went into the other office and picked up his black bag, then left. Kay went into one of the examining rooms and checked over the oxygen equipment.

When she went back to the reception room Luis was there. He smiled broadly when he saw her.

"I saw you in the lobby and waved but you did not see me," he said.

"I'm sorry, Luis," Kay smiled. "How are you?"

"I think I am in love," he said seriously.

"Think? Don't you know?" Lorna asked.

"No, I don't know," Luis frowned. "But I think it is love. When I see Consuelo I feel sick in my stomach, like I'm going to throw up."

Kay and Lorna doubled up in laughter.

"That's something you ate," Lorna howled. "Too much licorice."

"No, I do not have licorice when I see her," Luis said. "But I have trembling legs."

"What do you think?" Lorna asked Kay.

"Mmm, I had that feeling once. I was eleven and a boy hit

HOTEL NURSE

me on the head with a book. Mom told me it was love. I think the book was too heavy."

"I can see you do not understand about love," Luis said, injured. "But I forgive you because you are nurses and nurses perhaps do not know too much about love, only medicine."

"Nurse know much about love, amigo," Lorna said. "Take Miss Mercer here; she's in love."

"You are?" Luis grinned. "Do you like it?"

"Oh, Luis, she's teasing you," Kay laughed.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Luis said. "Because even if I do get a funny feeling when I see Consuelo, I think I am happy to be in love."

"Good for you," Kay said.

The door opened and a young woman walked in.

"I was told to come here to Medical," she said, looking around quickly. Luis bowed and went out of the room. "My husband is flying down to Mexico City tomorrow afternoon and at the last moment I decided to go with him. But I just found out I don't have a smallpox certificate. Do I get that here?"

"No," Kay told her. "You can get vaccinated here but you have to go to the Board of Health to get the certificate stamped. It's routine. We'll give you the vaccination and the certificate signed by the hotel doctor; you can take it down to the Board of Health at nine in the morning and you'll be in order for your trip."

"Will that take long?" she asked.

"Minutes, once you get to the Board of Health offices," Kay said. "Why don't you come into the next room. Dr. Spence will be here in a few minutes. Has your husband been vaccinated?"

"Oh, yes, he makes these trips quite often. He's a lawyer," she said.

The afternoon and evening went quickly. There were no

HOTEL NURSE

real emergencies and little excitement. Yet they were kept busy with minor ailments. Twice Dr. Spence went out to check on his heart patient and once he went down to the kitchen when the pastry chef was reported to have fainted. He told Kay that the man was sick but he wouldn't make a snap diagnosis until he'd been given tests by his doctor.

"I sent him home and told him either he sees his doctor immediately or he has no job," Dr. Spence said. "That scared him, I guess. Blood pressure was very low."

Kay was out to supper when Betty called. Lorna said there'd been no message but Kay wondered. Betty wasn't likely to give a personal message over the phone.

She had one more call that evening. Just before she was getting ready to leave, Johnny called.

"I'll be waiting for you downstairs," he said. "Madrid Room. Don't disappoint me, honey."

"Johnny, I'm beat," she told him quickly about her day.

"Just for a little while, honey," he said. "It'll relax you. Besides, I want to take you home and kiss you again and I can't get off for another hour and a half."

Her heart quickened in spite of herself. And when, later, she applied her makeup carefully and slipped into her red dress, she felt a new excitement. It was fun to have someone waiting for her when she finished working. It was thrilling to think that Johnny wanted her to sit and hear him play, to be with her. And it was even more thrilling to walk into the Madrid Room and have the headwaiter recognize her and take her immediately to the small table near Johnny's piano.

Johnny acknowledged her presence by playing a love song for her, nodding her way, not taking his eyes off her. Kay found herself blushing and looking down at the drink on the table. Did everyone else notice? Did it look as though she were Johnny's girl?

She thought about that. Johnny's girl. It sounded good. It

HOTEL NURSE

sounded right. Johnny's hands skimmed over the keys and she remembered how it felt when they were around her waist, how his mouth felt on hers. With Johnny life would be all music and emotion and excitement. It would be sitting in a place like this and being noticed as Johnny's wife. It would be a world far apart from her hospital world. As a matter of fact, the opposite of it altogether. No sickness, no dying, no worrying or tears. Johnny's world was the bright world of make-believe. Yet his world was as necessary as the hospital world.

She looked around the room at the people enjoying themselves. Therapy of another kind? She wondered. She knew that as she sat there all her tenseness drained out of her slowly and she felt alive and gay and a need to be kissed and loved.

Johnny was playing a love song. He dedicated it to a middle-aged woman sitting at a table with a young couple. The woman's eyes were bright on Johnny and didn't leave him as he played. When it was over, Johnny got up, bowed slightly toward the woman, then came to sit with Kay.

"You look delicious enough to kiss," he said.

"That was mighty pretty playing, sir," she teased.

"That woman lost her husband a year ago today," he said. "That's her son and daughter-in-law; she's visiting them. I played it because she wanted to remember."

"How do you know all this?" Kay asked, astonished.

"I'm psychic," he took her hand and held it. "I know people. I know you, too. I love you. How about that? Me, Johnny, in love. Know what I did when I left you this morning? I went back downtown and played for two more hours. And I told Jeff, he was the trombone, that I was going to marry you. He said I was cracked. I said sure. So I'm going to marry you."

"You don't know a thing about me," she said, wondering

HOTEL NURSE

whether it was nervousness that made her voice crack or whether she was just afraid that what Johnny said would come true. And did she want it to come true? Married to Johnny? Not Mark? Why not? Johnny didn't beat around the bush or wait to tell her or be only a part of the dim future. Johnny was here and now. Grab and live, his motto, and the best one Kay could think of anymore.

"I don't want to know a thing about you but that I love you," he spaced out his words. "If people know too much about one another, they never marry. They hate each other," he said, snarling quietly at her.

She laughed. Dare she tell him about Mark? Did she owe that to him? Or would she be a cheat if she said nothing?

"I have to get back and play," Johnny said. "Don't go away."

Later, she refused to accompany him downtown to a jam session.

"I can't, I just can't," she pleaded. "Johnny, I do have to get some rest. This hotel job won't last forever. When it's over, when I have more free time, then."

"By then you'll be spending all your free time with yours truly," he said.

They were in a cab and he pulled her close to him, turning her chin up so he could kiss her.

"I hate kissing in cabs," he said.

"You do it often?" she asked, very much aware of the driver who could see them in his rear view mirror.

"Every time I get a pretty girl in my clutches." He pulled her closer still. "Know something? You're the last girl in the world I thought I'd flip for. A nurse. How'd you do it?"

"Did I?"

"Didn't you?"

"Guilty," she went along with the game.

"You like it?"

HOTEL NURSE

"What?"

"Nursing?"

"Yes or I wouldn't be doing it."

"That's not the kind of answer I meant," he said. "I mean, do you feel it way down in your bones, the way I feel music?"

"I think I do," she said.

"Good, you really don't," he answered his own question. "Because there would be no thinks or ands or buts. Take me—if you were to say Johnny, no more music for you, to the boondocks with you, I'd slit my cotton-picking throat."

"But that's ridiculous!"

"Is it?" he chuckled. "Not the way I feel. Gosh, honey, what a world I have to show you. Listen, I'm hitting my agent to get me a spot on a west coast show. Permanent show. Then there's a place on Sunset Strip. I was out there last summer. You've got to hear these guys play to believe it. Ever been to California?"

"No."

"Good, I'll take you there," he said. "I'll take you to places where you've never been and never will go except with me," his voice was tender. "Maybe that's it with me. With you, it's all new again; I can make it all come new again."

"Johnny, wait," she started to say.

But his lips were on hers and then they were at her house. Johnny took her to the door and kissed her again.

"Remember what I told you," he whispered. "I'm going to marry you."

He ran back to the cab and Kay went on upstairs.

She had unlocked the door of the apartment before she realized the lights were still on. Betty must have forgotten to put them out or had been expecting her to come in earlier.

Then she saw him.

Mark was sprawled in a chair, fast asleep.

HOTEL NURSE

She stared at him for a moment, so defenseless in his sleep, so unaware that she was staring at him.

Gently she went over and shook his shoulder.

"Mark," she whispered.

He came awake instantly, as he had trained himself to do. For a moment his eyes were clouded, trying to relocate himself. Then he saw her. He frowned.

"You've been asleep," she smiled.

He glanced at his watch, then at her. "My God! It's after one," he said. "I've been here since eleven."

"I'm sorry, Mark," she said.

"I thought you'd be home soon after eleven. I called Betty earlier; she told me what time you get home," he seemed embarrassed, annoyed.

That was why Betty had called the hotel. Then why hadn't she called again?

"I'm sorry," Kay said. "I didn't come right home. I was out with a . . . friend."

Mark stood up. "I guess I'm the one who's sorry around here," he said. "My mistake."

"Mark, don't," Kay said. "Let's not quarrel anymore. You could have called me at the hotel, you know."

"Well, I could have but I didn't," he said. "Kay, listen, what's happening anyway? What's gone wrong between us? I thought we understood each other. If it's because of you know—"

Penny Adair; Kay didn't help him by mentioning her name. She turned away. Now she had no right to be jealous of Penny Adair anymore. Because there was Johnny.

Mark caught her and whirled her around hard.

"Let's you and me talk," he said.

"Mark, no," she put her arms up to find him off. "Not now. It's late and I'm tired and you're angry. Please, not now." The moment she said it she realized she was being a coward.

HOTEL NURSE

She didn't want to let Mark pin her down because she was not the same girl anymore. Not since Johnny had entered her life and since she had entered the new, exciting world at Hanes Hotel.

"I'm so tired," she said and she realized she was bone weary and on the verge of tears.

He realized it, too. He glanced at his watch, then leaned over and kissed her gently. Kay closed her eyes. What kind of woman was she? Being kissed by two men within the hour, both of them thinking there was no one else in her life.

"All right," he said gently. "We'll talk another time, soon. I have things to settle with you and I intend to get them settled but not while you're half asleep on your feet. Good night, Kay," he said.

She watched him go, feeling as though she were a traitor. A decent, honest person would have told him the truth, would have let him know about Johnny. But she hadn't told Johnny about Mark either. Wearily, she turned off the lights and got ready for bed.

X

THE FOLLOWING week Kay was asked by Mrs. Phillips to do private duty nursing for a very special patient.

Kay was flattered when Mrs. Phillips told her Dr. Weeks had requested that she be assigned to the case for the week. And then she found out the special patient was Mrs. Weeks. She had never allowed herself to become involved with patients; that was one of the cardinal rules of nursing. But the moment she walked into Mrs. Weeks' room she knew she'd find it difficult not to love and suffer with this gentle-faced woman.

"Dr. Weeks told me he was getting me the prettiest nurse at Deepwood and now I believe him," she smiled and Kay's heart went out to her. Hair that once must have been thick and blonde now was wispy around a defenseless-looking face, dominated by big blue eyes.

Dr. Weeks had told Kay his wife was suffering from multiple myeloma, a progressive and fatal malignancy involving the plasma cells of the bone marrow.

"We've known the course of the disease to vary," Dr. Weeks told her firmly, not quite looking at her. "The mean life span is seventeen months after onset. Yet we've known cases that lasted a short three months, others twelve months. The important thing is prompt diagnosis and I think we're fortunate there. Mrs. Weeks has an increased susceptibility

HOTEL NURSE

to infection because abnormal plasma cells give rise to poor and ineffective antibody production, making it difficult for the patient to fight secondary infections.

"She suffers, also, from severe anemia, attributable to the disease and some kidney damage. How much is what we are going to find out this week. We'll take bone marrow tests, also. The important thing to remember is that myeloma patients have a tendency to fracture easily and that is why nursing is so important. She'll need gentle handling and to be made as comfortable as possible. We're going to try a new drug, cyclophosphamide, which seems promising. Do not allow Mrs. Weeks to become fatigued at any time. You will encourage high fluid intake, ambulation, which is important, and try to prevent any fractures."

"I'll do my best," Kay said.

"I know you will," he answered.

Mrs. Weeks herself, was most cooperative.

"You poor child," she said to Kay the first time Kay was giving her a bath. "This is as much of a strain on you as it is on me. Let's pretend I'm an egg that can crack and treat me like one," she smiled.

Kay's heart went out to her for understanding.

"You know, it helps to be married to a doctor, sometimes," Mrs. Weeks told her as the days went by. "At least I know; he doesn't have to tell me. But I often wonder if I wouldn't much rather be a stranger to medicine. Are you going to marry a doctor, Miss Mercer?"

"Oh, I've thought of it," Kay admitted. "Doesn't everyone?"

"Well, they should," Mrs. Weeks said. "They make good husbands. But you have to be a pretty special person yourself to be a doctor's wife, you know."

"I suppose so," Kay said, not wishing to continue on a subject that was causing her a great deal of pain right now.

She hadn't seen Mark yet and as for Johnny, he kept leav-

HOTEL NURSE

ing little notes in Medical for her so she'd find them when she arrived. She'd seen him once; he'd been playing at a private afternoon tea for a charity group and afterward had sneaked a lovely floral centerpiece up to her.

"Don't ever say I don't give you presents," he laughed.

"Johnny, how'd you get that out of the banquet room?" Kay chided him.

"I just walked out with it," he said. "The place was like a funeral with flowers all over the place. So why let them go to waste?"

"I'll wear them going home," Kay laughed, holding the sprawling centerpiece up against her white uniform.

Actually, she had taken them home and for some unaccountable reason to Mrs. Weeks the next day.

By that time she had told Mrs. Weeks about her part-time hotel nursing job and Mrs. Weeks was fascinated, wanting to know all about it.

Were the flowers a bad omen? Would the accident have happened had it not been for those foolish flowers? Kay was never to know or stop blaming herself.

She put the flowers on the sliding tray rack for Mrs. Weeks to enjoy. They were in a flat white glass bowl and Kay had filled it with water in order to keep the flowers fresh as long as possible.

After Mrs. Weeks had had her lunch, Kay went outside to order herself some lunch from the cafeteria. She stopped a moment at the charge desk to talk to Madge.

"Stick around and say good-bye to Penny Adair," Madge bubbled.

"Good-bye?"

"She came in with flowers and candy for everyone, or almost everyone," Madge said. "Thank-you to all of us lovely people for being so terribly kind to her. Gee, you've missed

HOTEL NURSE

a lot being on special. She was here earlier and is supposed to come by and speak to Mrs. Phillips."

"Well, can't have everything," Kay said, her heart doing a flip-flop. Did that mean Penny Adair was saying good-bye to Mark, too? And was it good-bye? Mark had been too busy to call or see her since Sunday night and if he had had time off, she was working at the hotel. Well, if he had his Penny Adair, she couldn't complain too loudly anymore. She had Johnny.

It was with a troubled mind that she went back to her patient.

Mrs. Weeks was white and in pain and her bed a shambles. She had tried to pull the tray rack up across her bed, having awakened from her cat nap and in so doing had tipped off the flowers. The vase had fallen on her leg, spilling flowers and water everywhere.

Kay gasped and turned white, too.

"Mrs. Weeks," she wanted to cry. She knew what this meant, a fracture. It was unavoidable in her condition. And it had to happen that one moment she was out of the room, that one split second.

"I'm so sorry," Mrs. Weeks kept gasping. "It's not your fault, not your fault. Please, don't blame yourself."

"Oh, why did you?" Kay felt like crying more than at any time in her life. She rang for the doctor immediately, then picked up the phone and called the desk to find out if Dr. Weeks was still in the hospital.

"He left half an hour ago," the desk told her.

"Will you have him call the hospital, please," Kay said. "Have him call the resident."

By that time Mark, accompanied by one of the young interns was in the room. He took one look at Mrs. Weeks' leg and told Kay to call for a stretcher.

HOTEL NURSE

"We'll go down to X-ray," he told Mrs. Weeks. "Doesn't look too bad. What'd you try to do? A twist in bed?"

"Just an accident, Doctor," Mrs. Weeks said. "Isn't that funny? I mean, people go to hospitals because they have accidents. I have one in the hospital which is much wiser of me, don't you think, Miss Mercer?"

Kay went to stand beside the bed and Mrs. Weeks reached out and took and held her hand tight. "Perk up, Miss Mercer, you look like a nurse," she smiled.

Kay accompanied Mrs. Weeks to X-ray and waited outside while the X-rays were being taken. Then she went back to the room with her to await the reading. But she knew, and she knew Mark knew, that there was a break there and in Mrs. Weeks' condition it was bad. Infection would be their greatest enemy and infection was a constant menace in a fracture.

Dr. Weeks had come to his wife's side by then and Kay withdrew to leave them alone. She went to the charge desk and stood by while Madge gabbed on the phone. When she hung up, she picked up a small box from her desk and handed it to Kay.

"Present for you, Kay," she said. "Came just a little while ago."

"Oh?" Kay picked it up, turning it over. No name on the wrapping. She opened it to find a bottle of expensive perfume. Her heart leaped. Mark? Johnny? She tore open a small white card which was enclosed.

"With grateful thanks for your encouragement," the card said, and it was signed, "Mrs. Hirtz." The little woman who had thought she was dying, who had had Addison's Disease and who had gone home alive and looking forward to a life with her family, albeit a life on constant medical care.

It broke Kay up. With Mrs. Weeks so dangerously ill, this seemed almost too much to Kay. She ran down the corridor

HOTEL NURSE

and into the nurses' lounge where she cowered for a moment like a scared kitten in a corner.

Life and death. A today for some, no tomorrow for others. She thought of little Mrs. Hirtz and her fears. Of course she was grateful; wasn't everyone who came out of a hospital grateful? A hospital was a hope and a hell at the same time. It offered healing and it also meted out death like a stern judge now and then.

Resolutely, Kay composed herself and went back to her patient. Maybe it was going to mete out death to Mrs. Weeks but she could help her until then.

Because it had been a personally gruelling week, Kay was happy to be going to her hotel chores on Friday night.

Entering the lobby and experiencing once again that warmth and comfortable feeling of well being, she had a moment of thinking she never wanted to go back to the hospital. Why should she? Why not take what Johnny offered? Music and soft lights and the happy things in life, things far removed from death and finality.

She told Lorna about Mrs. Weeks and later, when she and Dr. Spence had a few moments together, they talked about the illness that had only one end for Mrs. Weeks.

"I often think of how I'd react to something like that," Dr. Spence said slowly. "Whether I could take it or not or whether I'd shoot out my brains."

"Luckily, not too many people face such a decision," Kay said. "I hate decisions anyway."

"Oh? What grave decisions are you hating right now?"

"Now? None," she lied.

"Come on, people hate decisions only when they have to make them. Otherwise they're full of decisions. And advice."

Kay laughed. "I guess you're right," she said. "I think I'll invent a decision machine. You put in a problem with a pos-

HOTEL NURSE

sible yes answer or a possible no or a maybe and presto, you save wear and tear on the old brain."

"I've had only two big decisions in my life, I mean the kind that stumped me all the way," Dr. Spence said. "When I got married and when I decided to take on this job."

"Oh? And how did you arrive at the right answers?"

"Right answers? Who knows what the right answer is unless you plunge ahead. Well, I just followed the little voice, you know, the subconscious, the little man in here," he pointed to his solar plexus.

"That's easy to say," Kay laughed. "What if someone hasn't a speaking acquaintance with the little man?"

"Then make his acquaintance," Dr. Spence said.

"Like on television, voice off camera speaking is Mr. Conscience."

"No, subconscious, don't get them mixed up," Dr. Spence cautioned. "Your subconscious is you, your ego, the sum and total of you, your experience. You get to know him when you sleep. Tell him your problem before you go to sleep and in the morning, an answer."

Kay laughed. "I wish it were that easy," she said.

She was almost glad that the rest of the evening in Medical was easy. Giving a mother-to-be a tranquilizer because she was nervous and upset about traveling the next morning. Upset stomach for small boy, aged 5, who cornered the ice cream market. Ulcer complaint from permanent resident on the twenty-eighth floor who couldn't locate his private doctor. Dr. Spence made this call in person. Luis brought coffee and announced he had proposed to Consuelo and she was considering his proposal. So were her mother, two aunts and great aunt.

Lorna had an argument with her boyfriend on the phone and spent a half hour in the dressing room crying and trying to make her eyes look clear and unweepy as she put it.

HOTEL NURSE

At ten-thirty there was the box from the florist's shop in the hotel, for Kay. It was a single white rose. Johnny had written on the card. "Don't disappoint me tonight."

Just before Kay went off duty, Betty called.

"Hi," she said. "Coming right home tonight?"

"I'd planned on stopping in to listen to Johnny for a little while," Kay told her. "Why, honey? Everything all right?"

She and Betty had discussed Johnny and Betty was inclined to think Kay was making too much of it all.

"Just don't worry about anything and it all comes out," was Betty's philosophy.

"Fine, all's quiet on the eastern front," Betty said. "Mark called."

"When?" Kay asked.

"Oh, about nine o'clock. Wanted to talk to you and I told him this was your night at the hotel."

"Did he say anything else?" Kay wanted to know.

"No, not really," Betty said. "Why? Did you want me to ask him something?"

"No, silly," Kay said. "I'll be home early but go to sleep. I have my key."

"Right," Betty said, and hung up.

"Come with me to hear Johnny play for about an hour," she said to Lorna.

"No, thanks; you don't need a mourning party around," Lorna said.

"Then stop feeling sorry for yourself," Kay told her.

"Who has a better right? When I get my hands on George I'm going to string him."

"Good. Call him up and tell him and you'll feel better and he'll feel better."

"I'll call him up when hell freezes over," Lorna said, staring at the phone. She was still sitting there staring at it when Kay walked out. She knew Lorna would call her boyfriend

HOTEL NURSE

in another five minutes. This wasn't their first quarrel. Lorna's trouble was that she expected George to react as she would react to things and when he didn't do as she expected him to, she became angry. But then, it occurred to Kay as she walked into the Madrid Room, don't we all? Don't I expect Mark to act the way I want him to act? And Johnny, too? And yet right now I don't know what I want of either of them.

She sat down at her reserved table. Johnny blew her a kiss. She relaxed. This was good, this was the way it should be. As Johnny's wife she could meet him like this with every right in the world, sit and wait for him to finish his music, then take her home. Away from hospitals and schedules and medicines and nursing and death. This was what she should grab and run as if her life depended upon it.

She felt someone standing over the table and thought it was the waiter. But when she looked up, she saw it wasn't the waiter. It was Mark.

"May I sit down?" he said, pulling out a chair without waiting for her answer and sitting down beside her, leaning over to talk to her.

XI

"MARK," she couldn't hide the surprise in her voice. "What are you doing here?"

"What's it look like I'm doing?" he grinned. "I'm with you."

"Oh." It was a small sound, no more than that. She glanced covertly at Johnny who was bending close to the keys playing as if his life's breath was drawn from the ivories. It was always that way with Johnny and one of the reasons Kay loved him.

"Kay, we've been getting fouled up lately, know that?" Mark said amiably. "I feel like I'm riding tandem on a roller coaster for two and I don't like the feeling."

"I've been so busy, with two jobs," Kay said her chin thrust out just a bit defiantly.

"I know, and I think it's great what you've done for Ruthie, no kidding. When does she get back from her honeymoon?"

"In another week," Kay said.

"Swell," Mark said. "Listen, I called you a while ago but you were already gone. Some girl up there told me you'd be here so I came right over. Kay, I've been doing some thinking. Why don't we just go off and get married? I mean, as soon as Ruth is back and you don't have to break your neck on two jobs. Let's be married at least."

"But you still have to live at the hospital," Kay said.

"Well, it won't be forever. Anyway, when we are together

HOTEL NURSE

"I'll know you belong to me and to no one else," he touched her hand. "Listen, you've been giving me a wide berth and I want you to know, I don't like it. You're it for me, Kay, no one else."

"Not even Penny Adair?" Kay could have bitten her tongue after she said the words. It was the female in her and she couldn't help it. "I'm sorry."

"No, go ahead and say it if you're thinking it," Mark said. "Penny is a wonderful person, I got to know her pretty well."

"I'm sure you did," Kay murmured, looking at Johnny who now was looking at Mark quizzically and checking his watch to see how much longer before he could join Kay.

"Damn it, Kay, what'd you expect me to do? Be rude to Penny?" Mark said. "She's a good kid; we went out twice, once to a private screening of her new series and another time I took her to dinner at the Greek's on Third Avenue after she'd been shooting all day long."

"Mark, you don't have to explain to me," Kay said gently. She felt guilty at the same time. Why was she doing this to Mark when she had never told him about Johnny?

"Will you let me finish?" Mark said gruffly. "Let's get married and worry about an apartment and the rest later. In six months I'll have finished my residency at Deepwood and it's time then to make plans. Here, I even got you this," he reached into his pocket and brought out a small jeweler's box.

Kay felt her heart tighten. Oh, no, not now, not here, not with Johnny a few feet away and with her mind in an absolute whirl. She didn't know what to say to Mark now. A few weeks ago—ah, but a few weeks ago she hadn't been a hotel nurse, she hadn't stepped into a new world of glamor and a world that brought Johnny to her.

"Mark," she started to say when Johnny came to the table.

HOTEL NURSE

Johnny being Johnny he leaned over and kissed Kay on the lips.

"Glad you came, sweet," he said softly, pulling out a chair. "Friend of yours?" he indicated Mark.

Mark was staring darkly at Johnny. Kay saw him tighten his fists in that way he had when he had a problem to figure out.

"Johnny, this is Dr. Mark Bell, from the hospital," she said, making the introductions and feeling awfully funny about it. Almost like a Jezebel with both her men facing her across a white tablecloth in a night club.

"Hi, Doc," Johnny reached out a hand. After a fraction of a second, Mark shook it, then let it drop. "How'd you like the show?" Johnny asked.

"Fine, just fine," Mark said quietly. "More than I expected. Well, I've got to get off. Nice meeting you," he nodded to Johnny, looked hard at Kay. "Good night, friend."

He got up and walked out. The ring was on the table, right at Kay's fingertips. He hadn't even bothered to pick it up. For a minute Kay wanted to run after him. She started to rise, crying out Mark's name softly so as not to attract too much attention.

But Johnny stopped her with a hand on her arm.

"Hey, honey, take it easy," he said, pushing her gently back in the chair. "What goes here? Who is that guy anyway?"

"A doctor, I told you," Kay said quietly.

Let him go then; let him stalk off like a spoiled brat. What had he to offer her, ever? Even this ring, it was a laugh. A ring for what? Around her nose for the next year or two? Waiting, hoping, planning and then who was sure they'd ever get married? Who could be sure a Penny wouldn't come into the picture again and make him change his mind? Her eyes filled with tears. Johnny can marry me tomorrow, she thought,

HOTEL NURSE

and offer me a home and a husband and children now, not some distant future. She thought of the hospital and hated every inch of it. To some it might be a haven, to her it had become a prison for her hopes and dreams.

"Hey, hey, what kind of doctor? Eye, ear, nose and throat or does he fool around with the heart?" Johnny said, touching the jewelry box on the table lightly.

"It's over now, Johnny," Kay said softly. "He was a man I used to date and he got serious," well, a little white lie didn't hurt. "But it's over now. I'm sorry you had to be in on this."

"Don't worry about it," Johnny said. "Just make sure it's over, okay, honey? You're my girl, I told you that the first night we met, remember? Almost the first night. You're for me, honey, not some pill pusher. We'll really blaze a trail across this country. Boy, what I have to show you, it's like a new world."

"I know, Johnny, it sounds exciting and wonderful," Kay held onto his hand. It did sound exciting and wonderful; then why didn't she react better? It was the ring and Mark's attitude. When she got over that, when she saw to it that the ring was returned to him, she'd get over this whole thing. With Johnny there'd be nothing but music in her life.

"Time for me to hit the ivories again," Johnny said, close to her ear. "Know something? I love you. I say the words, I taste them and I can't believe them. Me, Johnny Riels in love. But you're like music to me, honey. Stay right here, don't go away. I want to take you home and kiss you."

She watched Johnny go back to the piano and begin to play.

XII

AFTERWARD, Kay was to wonder what course her life would have taken had she returned Mark's ring to him immediately, instead of slipping it into her purse and forgetting about it for a few days.

Johnny had informed her that he was signing a contract to go to the west coast and work. He expected that she would go with him.

And she had every intention of going with him. Especially after seeing that picture of Mark in the newspaper.

"PENNY ADAIR SHOW A SMASH" the story had said. But it was the picture and the caption that had interested Kay. The picture had shown Mark in a tux, rented no doubt, bending over a smiling Penny Adair in one of her shimmering, shining creations. Penny was the kind of girl who seemed to be spun out of sugar and spice and everything other women wished they were.

"The Penny Adair Show, which had its premiere last night, has been acclaimed a winner," the story said. "Penny, who is shown in the picture above with a very important doctor in her life, Dr. Mark Bell, said she hopes the show goes on for a dozen years. That includes residuals, of course."

Well, that could include the precious Dr. Mark Bell, too, for that matter. What was it he had said to her? He had wanted to get married even though they'd have to wait be-

HOTEL NURSE

fore setting up housekeeping. Well, obviously, he didn't care how or where or with whom he did set up housekeeping.

Kay had hated Mark while reading the news item. Later, she had torn out the page and shoved it in between a couple of books. She knew her actions required analysis but for the moment she hadn't the heart to throw Mark away in the garbage. He had never looked so handsome or so well as he did in that picture.

It wasn't until Kay was in bed that night, that she remembered Mark's ring still nestled in the bottom of her makeup box, where she'd put it for safekeeping. It made her feel sad to think of the ring there. Quietly, so as not to bother her sister Betty, she slipped out of bed and took out the ring. Gently, she slipped it on the third finger of her left hand and looked at it a long while until she felt tears pushing at the back of her eyes. What had happened between them? She had never wanted to hurt Mark. Not Mark, of all people. But nothing stood still in this world. Not even love. It was either nourished constantly or it died. She and Mark were both guilty of killing their love. But wasn't it inevitable? Mark was a doctor who had to set aside a time for moonlight and roses, even love. But Johnny. Johnny's image flashed through her mind, intense, mercurial, loving her every moment with his music.

Sadly, Kay reached for her purse and slipped the ring into the inside zippered compartment where it would be safe. She'd find a way of returning Mark's ring without hurting him, or herself, any further.

Entering the hospital the next morning, Kay saw that she was late. She only hoped Mrs. Phillips was busy elsewhere and didn't notice as she slipped off the elevator on the fourth floor and went to the lounge to hang up her coat and leave her purse. When she put her purse in her locker she remem-

HOTEL NURSE

bered Mark's ring. Quickly, she slipped it out of her purse and into her uniform pocket. Why? She was never to know.

The day was one of those trying, frustrating ones where every patient seemed bent on making life with Kay Mercer, R.N. a dismal experience.

First there was Mr. Alberian, a tough old man who'd had a double hernia operation two days before and refused to get out of bed, as his doctor advised.

"But I will hold you," Kay told him patiently. "I won't let you fall or hurt yourself."

"Hmpf," Mr. Alberian scoffed. "You such a skinny thing. I fall and slit open!"

She had to smile at his words, it was so improbable that he'd fall or that his stitches would tear. But he couldn't be convinced. Then Kay had a thought.

"Wait a moment," she told him, leaving the wheel chair right beside his bed. She went outside and caught up with one of the practical nurses in her striped uniform.

"Mrs. Wolls, will you help me a moment?" she said. Quickly she explained about the patient's fears. Mrs. Wolls went into the room with her.

"Now you won't have any reason to be afraid of falling," Kay smiled at the patient. "You were right; I'm too skinny to handle a big man like you, but Mrs. Wolls and I together can do it nicely."

All the while she was talking she was easing the man's robe over his shoulders, putting his arms into the sleeves. Then gently, she and Mrs. Wolls helped the man to take his first step out of bed and into the wheel chair. The smile that touched his lips was satisfaction enough for Kay. She winked at Mrs. Wolls.

"If you're real good, we'll let you sit here for a half hour now," she said. "Want to look out of the window?"

"That'd be fine," he said. Kay had a feeling his pride

HOTEL NURSE

wouldn't allow him to say thanks but he did smile at her as she went out of the room.

Later that morning she had a run in with a new admission.

Mrs. DeClerk was a touchy, demanding woman in her late forties who was admitted for a possible hysterectomy. Kay had done the routine admission, taking temp, blood pressure, noting all this on the patient's chart and had wondered at the surliness of her patient. She left the semi-private room and was called back by a light over the door. Returning to answer it, she noticed Mrs. DeClerk working diligently at trying to dislodge the restraining bar around the bed which Kay had forgotten to put down.

It dawned on Kay then that the woman might be fearful of such a little thing, wondering how seriously ill she was or how radical the operation might be that would require the bars around the bed.

Quickly, she went to help the woman. "I'm sorry," she said in a quiet, soothing voice. "We're full up today, Mrs. DeClerk, or you wouldn't have had to take this bed. As soon as another is available we'll switch, okay?"

It was wonderful to see the smile break out on the woman's face and the gratitude there. Such a simple thing but it might have made the difference between a happy cooperative patient and a surly, miserable one.

It was moments like that that made Kay feel nursing was more than worthwhile.

Kay had not seen Mark all morning but she understood he was going to be in surgery all day, open heart surgery, Mrs. Phillips had said. Once in a while she'd touch the ring in the pocket of her uniform and an all-gone feeling would assail her. Is this how it all ended one day? Forgotten, pushed aside as though it had never happened?

She had time only for a quick sandwich and a cup of coffee for lunch, before she reported back to her floor.

HOTEL NURSE

There was a message for her from Johnny. Madge was all grins as she handed the slip of paper to Kay.

"He wants you to call him pronto and from the way he sounded, I'd call him, doll," Madge said.

"Okay, you call him then," Kay teased.

"Don't be fresh, I just might," Madge teased right back.

It was shortly before visiting hours ended at two forty-five that Kay saw Mark. She had taken a few minutes to run down to the gift shop right off the lobby and buy a small bottle of perfume for Mrs. Weeks. She was coming back into the lobby with the wrapped package in her hands when she saw a knot of people by the front door. Looking closer, she saw why everyone who passed by, and that included visitors on their way out, clustered around a tiny form with that flowing golden hair and wrapped up in a mink coat. Penny Adair.

She was signing autographs with Mark beaming at her side. He said something to her and started to walk away, but Penny reached out and touched his arm in a proprietary air that stopped him in his tracks.

Kay didn't wait to look anymore. She hurried toward the back and the freight elevators, not wanting to meet Mark or anyone else. Obviously, she'd been foolish enough to wallow in self-pity but Mark was doing A-okay. Now the ring in her pocket seemed to be a living, burning thing and she wished she had sent it to Mark in an envelope or something.

On the floor once more, Madge called out to her, waving a piece of paper. "Hey, you missed Penny Adair. She signed this picture for my daughter. She's really the sweetest little thing."

"I guess she is," Kay said bitingly, not caring how Madge took it or what she thought.

It was lucky she had only another hour on the floor. For the first time in her nursing career she felt impatient, anxious

HOTEL NURSE

to be off the floor, out of the hospital. She thought longingly of the hotel and of Johnny. That was her new life now; it took something like that scene downstairs to prove it to her. From now on it was going to be glamor and excitement and Johnny by her side.

Not until she got home did she take the ring out of her uniform pocket. She hadn't even thought about it again; that's how much it meant to her.

Betty was home.

"Working tonight?" she asked her sister.

Kay looked at her. Wasn't it time she took her into her confidence and told her all about Johnny?

"Why?" she asked instead. "Any reason you'd want me home?"

"Well, we could celebrate," Betty's eyes were shining. "I'm honor roll material, no kidding. Did you ever think I'd make it? Gosh, Kay, I don't know how I'd have done it without you, I mean if you hadn't made me give up my job and really grind at it. It's sure been worth it."

So much for telling her about Johnny or giving her something to worry about right now.

"That's wonderful news," she said. "I'm really proud of you, kitten."

"Not prouder than I am of myself. How about it? When do we celebrate?"

"Well, in another week Ruthie will be back," she said. "And I'll be free nights again and we can make a big night of it."

"Wonderful. I'll ask Jerry and you can find out what night Mark will be free. You know what I'd really like to do? Go to the biggest, fanciest restaurant in town and just gorge myself!"

Mark. Well, she'd like Johnny, too. Perhaps even more

HOTEL NURSE

than Mark. Johnny was the kind who took over instantly. She'd tell Johnny tonight. They'd plan to surprise Betty, make a big production of it at the Madrid Room.

"It's a date," she promised.

Time enough later to tell her about the switch in partners.

XIII

IT STARTED out as a routine evening. Later, Kay was to remember it that way. A routine Tuesday evening without the weekend guests at the hotel, without any pressures. Dr. Spence and she talked a while about his newest hobby, painting an old farmhouse he and his wife had bought out in the country so the children would have free rein.

Listening to him talk, seeing his eyes light up when he spoke about his family, Kay felt a twinge of jealousy. How wonderful to have your life all planned out like that: no doubts, no fears, no backward looks.

Johnny called her around six-thirty to ask if she'd have an early supper with him if she could get away.

"I've got things to ask you, Nurse," he said. "Like what to do about blood pressure when a guy's kooky about a girl and all that!"

"Take an aspirin," she laughed.

"Kay, I can't hold out until I see you. I've got it, the west coast thing," he spoke quietly into the phone. "I haven't told anyone around here yet so keep it under your hat. Know what that means?"

"Oh, Johnny, I'm so glad for you," she said.

"For us, honey, for us," he said. "We're on our way. You can hang up the sterile apron and from now on it's you for me and me for you."

HOTEL NURSE

"Johnny—" she started to say something. What? That she wanted more time, that she wasn't sure? That wasn't quite the truth either.

"I'll see you at supper," Johnny she said.

She arranged it with Lorna to take her supper hour earlier so that she and Johnny might meet. Lorna, grinning knowingly, agreed. "I'm for the cause of love or whatever," she said. "Sure, you go whenever you like, Kay," she told her.

It happened shortly after that. Kay had gone to the window to look out at the dismal weather. It had fogged down so completely that she could barely make out the building across the street, and down on the avenue the street lights were like eerie globes of yellow phosphorus dropped out of another world.

"It's gotten messy out there," she said to Lorna. "Glad I'm not going out to supper tonight."

Lorna came to stand beside her and look out at the weather. "It's too warm," she said. "That's why it got so foggy."

"You know your weather," Kay said. She was about to turn away when she felt it. Both of them felt it. A slight shudder, hardly discernible and yet enough to be felt. At the same time there was the sound of a dull crash as though coming from far away.

Both girls turned quickly back to the street.

"My God, I'll bet it's a car crash," Lorna said.

They peered intently into the street, trying to see something.

"In this soup, it's hard to see your nose in front of your face," Lorna said.

The phone shrilled just then. Lorna dived for it at the same time that Dr. Spence came out into the reception room.

Afterward, Kay remembered that in that moment she had had a sharp premonition of fear. Something had hap-

HOTEL NURSE

pened. Her thoughts went first to Betty, then Mark, then Johnny. Incredible, she was to remember later, how little time she spent thinking about herself.

"My God! We'll be right there," Lorna was saying into the phone. She hung up and turned to Kay and Dr. Spence.

"It's an airplane; it just dived into the hotel tower. Aren't there . . . the private apartments!"

"Let's go," Dr. Spence called out. He ran into the supply room. Kay and Lorna followed. They gathered up bandages, antiseptic, splints, whatever they could handle, and ran out of the medical department.

Luis was already on his way to them; he ran back to the elevator with them. "It's bad up there," he told them, shaking as he helped Lorna with some of her bandages. "It was an airplane, a little one, I think. It got lost in the fog and went smack, right into the tower."

"Luis," Dr. Spence barked out orders. "When you let us off, call the ambulance. No, call at Midtown Hospital and then come back; we may need more than one ambulance. Kay, Lorna, watch yourselves; there may be danger of a fire up there."

They couldn't even be let off at the tower suites. They had to get out of the elevator and walk the last two flights up for fear of getting stuck in the elevator.

The scene that embraced them was like a battlefield. What formerly were luxurious suites and a wide carpeted corridor was now a shambles, as though a bomb had exploded right in the midst of it. Through an opening at the far end the foggy night rolled into the building and here firemen were rushing forward to put out a fire. There were shouts and orders and yells.

Kay caught a little child in night clothes, crying and bleeding from a head wound, heading toward the gaping hole at the far end of the building.

HOTEL NURSE

"No, no," she held the child close, blood spattering her. "Let us help you, honey. Don't cry."

"Mommy, I want my Mommy," he yelled.

A woman was lying nearby, her leg grotesquely twisted under her. She was moaning. Quickly, Dr. Spence knelt with Kay beside him holding the child.

"That's Mommy." The boy, about seven, started to hug his mother. She gave a scream as her leg twisted some more.

"Compound fracture," the doctor said. "Give the child to someone to get out of here. I'll give her morphine for the pain. Don't move her, we don't want a blood clot."

Someone took the child from Kay. She tried to soothe the woman who was moaning with pain. She saw another man staggering toward her, his arm dangling by his side. She leaped to help him, to stop him from wandering now toward the fire.

She heard shouts and voices. And then there were the welcome white-coated figures from the hospital. Interns and ambulance stretchers and helping hands to ease patients on to them and take them away from this holocaust.

Once Kay put a hand to her head to push back her hair and it felt sticky with blood and dirt. But there was so much to do. The pilot of the plane had been killed. She knelt beside one of the interns from the hospital as he tried to find a heartbeat. There was a fine hairline crack along the skull and it now began to bleed quietly, as though it was the last possible thing it could do.

"Are you sure he's dead?" Kay asked.

"Yes, he's gone; probably skull fracture killed him instantly. Nurse, give me a hand with this man over here. He's burned down one side of his body." The stench from burning flesh reached her nostrils and she held her breath to keep from getting sick.

She caught sights of Lorna and Dr. Spence now and then,

HOTEL NURSE

but she was too busy to talk to anyone. She went from patient to patient, soothing, helping. Once Luis was there and she sent him back down to Medical for more bandages.

Quietly, mercifully, the patients were carried away on stretchers. Those would go to the hospitals. Others who were not so badly hurt, were led to the other floor to be taken to their rooms and to seek further medical care. She watched a young intern help an older woman over some rubble and toward one of the hotel boys who took her arm to lead her away from the awful mess.

They're so helpless, turning to us for aid, for comfort, for life, she thought fiercely. She had never been prouder of her profession than at that moment. She kept looking around, half expecting to see Mark stride in and take over, Mark with his sure hands, his smile, his know-how and ability. Her heart swelled with love for him and she felt tears oozing down her blood-streaked, dirty face.

She wanted to run out of there crying his name, telling him how much she loved him. But her duty was here, as Mark's would have been. Doggedly, weary to her very bones, she stayed with it until the last person had been removed, until the ambulances had gone and she and Lorna and Dr. Spence could go down to medical and collapse on the chairs.

Dr. Blank, who had joined in the fight to save lives, went into the inside office and came back with some paper cups and a bottle of brandy.

"Now it's time for me to prescribe for my staff," he said gruffly. "Chuck-a-lug and that's an order."

Tears smarted her eyes as she drank, but Kay was grateful for the immediate warmth that spread to her limbs and helped her uncurl her tightly clenched fists.

"It was some night, girls," Dr. Spence said, red-eyed, weary and yet smiling.

This is it, of course, Kay thought. This is our reward. And

HOTEL NURSE

no other profession in the world can offer this special, final thrill. Because we are the only people in the world, doctors and nurses, who can give life where life is flickering away.

There was a banging on the door. Some reporters rushed in with photographers wanting to take pictures of the medical staff. Kay blinked in the rapid lights that went off and on and she tried to say something. Then she felt someone take her by the arm and lead her away.

She went gratefully. It was Johnny, folding her into her coat, taking her out of the noisy reception room and down the hallway toward the elevators.

"Honey, when I knew you were up there I nearly went out of my mind," he said. "They wouldn't let anyone up. They had more police around here than around the UN when they're having a parade. Are you okay?"

"I'm beat," Kay said. "Johnny, can you get me into a cab? I just want to get home and into a hot tub."

"Sure, baby, sure," he said. "You just take it easy. Johnny will see that you get home all ship-shape."

He got her into a cab and went with her to the apartment. At the door, she stopped him from coming in. "I don't want to talk anymore, Johnny," she said. "Tomorrow?"

"You bet, all your tomorrows." His kiss was warm and tender on her lips that felt cracked and burned from the hours near the fire.

Betty was asleep. She hadn't heard about the accident, obviously. Kay filled the tub with hot hot water and slipped into it. She thought she might just sleep there all night long.

XIV

SHE THOUGHT she had done just that when she was awakened by the shrill ringing of the telephone. For a moment, she had to collect her thoughts to remember where she was. The din of the fire and the holocaust of the night before had been a real nightmare all through her sleep. The ringing pounded at her ears again and she reached for the phone.

"Kay?" it was Mark's voice, gruff, almost angry. "Are you all right?"

"Mark, oh, yes, Mark," she began to cry foolishly. "Mark I—"

"Stay right there," he said. "I'll be over in five minutes."

"Mark?" she called, but he was gone. She glanced at the clock by the bedside. It said eight-forty-five. But she'd overslept! She was due at the hospital! And where was Betty?

She scrambled out of bed and brushed her teeth, pulling on a woolly white robe as she did so. Her feet were still bare when the doorbell rang. Then there was a pounding.

Running, she unlocked the door. Mark stood there in his resident's white coat, white pants, his stethoscope still hanging out of his pocket. He had a coat thrown over his shoulders.

He grabbed Kay the minute she opened the door and held her tightly against him. And for the first time in weeks, Kay

HOTEL NURSE

reacted like a foolish little girl without pride. She clung to him and cried softly against the warm, comfortable, shoulder.

"Oh, Mark, I need you so," she cried.

"When I heard about the plane hitting the hotel, I knew you'd be there. I called the hotel but they weren't giving out information. I nearly went out of my mind not knowing whether you were all right or not. This morning I decided the heck with it. I was coming over to see for myself. It's time I stopped being patient with you and started giving orders," he said.

"Mark, I was just going to say the same thing." She was giggling and crying at the same time. "Oh, Mark, last night in the middle of that awful thing, I kept hoping and wishing and thinking only of you. You know, I even prayed you'd come charging in, like they do in the movies, or the Penny Adair television things, you know? Then you'd rescue me and we'd cling together. Isn't that silly?"

"I don't know," he said slowly. "Maybe the Penny Adair part of it is silly, but the rest of it sounds good to me."

"Oh, Mark, I thought that you didn't love me anymore, that it was foolish to wait for love and marriage. When Johnny—" she stopped.

"Johnny!" She stared at Mark with wide eyes.

"I forgot all about Johnny!" she said.

She knew then that if she had any doubts about the man she loved, that was her proof. Not once last night, in all that agony and terror, had she forgotten Mark. But Johnny could be shut completely out of her mind.

"I don't want to hear about Johnny," Mark said gruffly.

"Please, Mark, he's a wonderful guy," Kay said. "He loves me. He wants me to marry him and go to the west coast with him."

"Are you?" Mark frowned.

"Do you want me to?"

HOTEL NURSE

"You know what I want you to do," he said.

"Kiss me?"

He kissed her. And then he kissed her again slowly, thoroughly, so that every fiber of her being was aware of him. His hands caressed her lightly and he pushed back her hair, looking down into her face.

"I love you so much it isn't safe for you to be here alone with me anymore," he said roughly. "When will you marry me?"

"When will you have me?" she asked.

"Today, tomorrow, next week—as soon as we can," he said. "I don't want to wait anymore. We can solve our other problems as they come along."

"It'll be a half a marriage for a while," she said. "You'll have to stay at the hospital."

"But I'll get home now and then," he said. "And each time it'll be a honeymoon all over again."

"Oh, Mark," she leaned against him. "I'm so happy."

"I love you," he said. "But I've got to get back or get skinned. Tonight? I'll try to get off an hour or so tonight."

She frowned. "Mark, I must see Johnny," she told him.

"Why?" he asked.

"It's the fair thing to do," she said. "And anyway, there's still my job at the hotel until Saturday when Ruthie gets back."

"I guess if you have to, you have to," he said.

"You're not jealous?" she teased.

"Do women have a monopoly on that?" he said.

He kissed her roughly, and this time his kiss was demanding and promising. "Just you remember that you belong to me from now on," he said. "I'll call you later."

"I have to get to the hospital," she wailed.

"Not today. I'm sure Mrs. Phillips doesn't expect you in today," he said.

HOTEL NURSE

He left. But habit was too strong for Kay to break. She had some breakfast and after calling Lorna to see how she felt, she went to the hospital anyway.

She hadn't expected to go on duty but, as usual she was needed. It was gratifying to know how many friends she had. Some had heard about her part in the evening's tragedy, others had read about it in the newspapers. Even the patients were full of questions.

"I'm so glad to see you," Mrs. Weeks had said. "When I heard, I was so worried about you."

"Where's your faith?" Kay laughed. "I'm indestructible. I'm a nurse."

Later, walking home, she remembered with what fierce pride she had said the words. "I'm a nurse."

It was more than a word; it was a badge; it was honor and duty and love and fulfillment for any woman.

She called the hotel to ask if Johnny was in. Betty told her there'd been several messages for her that afternoon from Johnny. Betty wanted to know more about him.

"Just you stay near that phone tonight as a personal favor to me," Kay told her. "Tell Mark when he calls that I'll be home by nine, okay? Then maybe I'll tell you a bedtime story."

"Boy, you better tell me something," Betty said. "I think lots has been happening I know nothing about."

Kay only laughed at her sister's quizzical face.

She found Johnny where she knew she would, in the Madrid Room, going over some piano pieces. It was too early for the dinner guests but Johnny was bending over that piano as though it were a special girl he was caressing. For a moment, Kay stood at the doorway and watched him, knowing that she'd always remember Johnny's sweetness and the peek he'd given her into his world. It was a special, beautiful world of music and she might not have known it but for him.

HOTEL NURSE

For this she would always love him a little in a corner of her heart.

She went to her table and sat down, waiting. When Johnny was ready, he'd notice her. In a little while he saw her, finished playing, and came over to her.

As he always did, he kissed her on the tip of the nose, taking both her hands in his and holding them as he hitched a chair close to hers.

"How are you, doll?" he smiled. "I gave the Bell system a bad time today. Are you all right, really all right?"

"I'm fine, Johnny," she said.

"Boy, last night," he shook his head. "I couldn't come up, you know; the whole place was roped off. And orders were to keep on playing here so no one would panic. But man, that was a real job. Honey, I got so worried about you I nearly flipped."

"Johnny," she had to stop him, find a way to say it. "Johnny—"

"No, listen to me; remember I had something to ask you? I don't dig that medicine jazz, sweetie. I want my woman warm and soft and smelling of perfume, not antiseptic. I want you to kick that habit and come out to the west coast with me. I can give you plenty to take care of—me."

She looked at him. He meant what he said. He didn't understand that "medicine jazz," as he said. And he'd resent it if she wanted to continue in her profession. Even if Mark wasn't in the picture, she couldn't go off with Johnny. She just couldn't throw away her years of training, forget her nurse's pledge, pretend she didn't care about a career that offered her so many rich rewards.

"I can't go, Johnny," she said. "I can't give it up."

"That nursing jazz?" he grinned. "What's to give up, honey? I'm offering you the world, glamor, the works. And me thrown in for good or bad measure."

HOTEL NURSE

"You're special, Johnny, and I'll always love you in a special way," she said softly. "But it wouldn't work for us. I'm from another world."

"Is that the only reason?" he asked.

Lie to him? Take the easy way out? That wouldn't be fair.

"No, Johnny, it isn't the only reason," she said. "Before I met you, there was someone else. A doctor at the hospital."

"It never was me, was it, honey?" he said quietly. "I kind of knew it, you know. Like when I'm playing a piece and everyone thinks it's swell, but I know, somewhere inside me, that I'm missing it. It was that way with us, wasn't it?"

"If you say so, Johnny."

"I say so," he said. "Well, look, you just sit here will you? And let me play to you a last time anyway? Just sit here."

"All right, Johnny," she said. She knew, instinctively, that he wasn't too heartbroken. Johnny lived in a different world from her own. For Johnny there would always be another girl, an intense love affair, a piano and a dimly lit cabaret where love was as make-believe as the tinsel decorations.

Johnny bent over the piano, almost as though he wasn't aware of anyone else in the room. Kay listened to him play for a while. That love affair would last his whole lifetime: Johnny and his piano. Quietly, unobtrusively, she slipped out of her chair and walked away. She didn't want to say good-bye to Johnny, and she had a hunch he was saying good-bye to her in his own way right now, with his music. She went home.

Mark was there, waiting impatiently, while Betty tried to get him to talk to her about a new idea in medical fashions.

When he saw Kay, he went toward her, embracing her.

"It's about time," he said gruffly.

"Wait," Kay said. "I have to get something."

HOTEL NURSE

She ran into her bedroom and from her purse she took out his ring. She brought it back and handed it to Mark.

"The last time you didn't put it on," she said. "Will you now?"

He put the ring on her finger and kissed her. She clung to him.

"Does anybody mind if I go down the hall and talk to Mrs. Riley?" Betty said.

Mark and Kay didn't even hear her.

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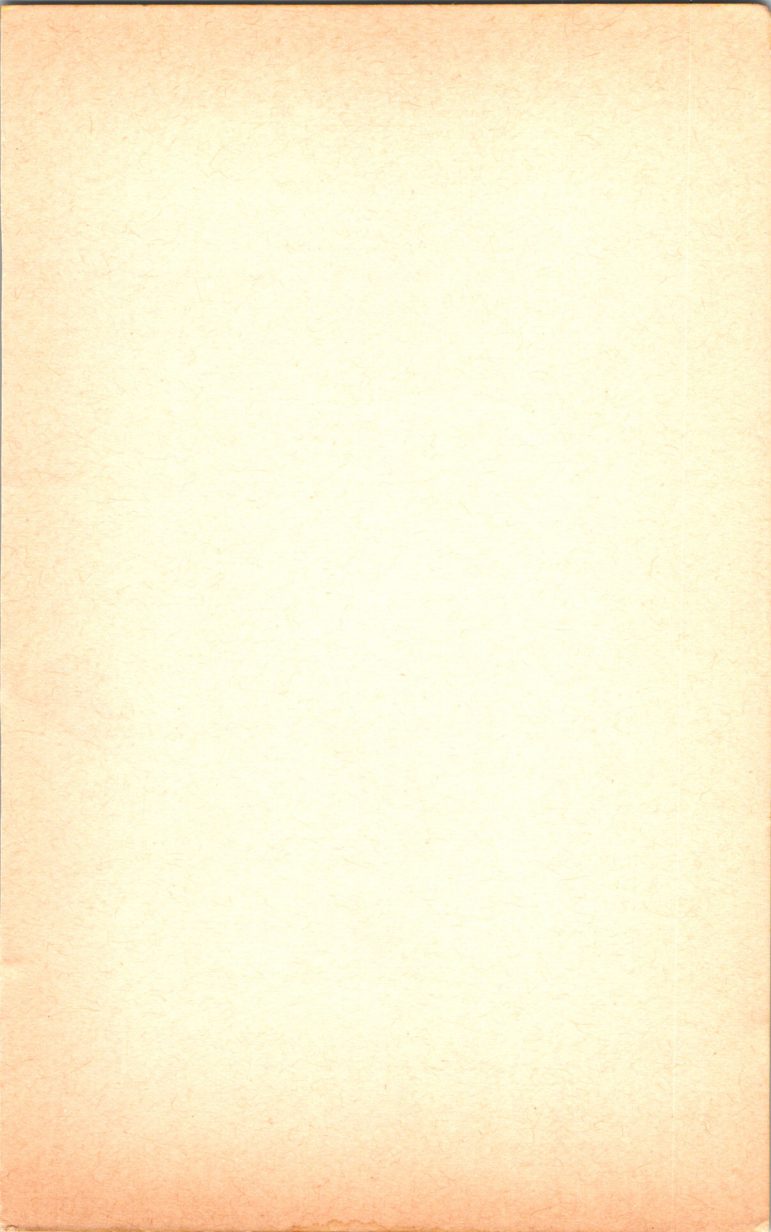
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